Firebaby by Bruce Campbell

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Summary: 10 years after Season 1 (1993), Mike and Eleven's infant baby exhibits dangerous powers, pulling them and their friends (Dustin, Will, and Lucas) into an unwanted adventure. Meanwhile, Hopper gets drawn into a mess involving an old friend from his days as a big city cop

1. Chapter 1

Note: I started writing this before Season 2 came out, so it only treats Season 1 as canon. That means no Billy, no Max, and no 008. I'm sorry, but instead of discarding this story, I'll finish it and then write others that use Season 2.

Firebaby

Chapter 1

The unwelcome sound of the telephone dragged Jim Hopper against his will out of a fairly pleasant dream. His eyes were still too blurry to locate the offending handset, so he fumbled around on the nightstand until he felt it. The phone rang again, unmercifully loud, before he could answer it. After finally managing to press the button and hold it to his ear, he grunted a wordless syllable into it.

"Jim Hopper?" The distant and tinny voice came over the phone. The voice sounded vaguely familiar, but his brain wasn't running on all cylinders yet. Hopper rubbed his eyes with two fingers and then glanced over at the clock.

"Hey, you called me," he reminded the anonymous voice who had the audacity to ask him a question so early in the morning. "Who is this?"

"It's Sam," the voice said. "Sam Asche."

"Sam?" Hopper said, his brain slowly waking up to do what it was supposed to. Then, with more recognition, he repeated "Sam? Why are you... How did you..." He sat up in bed and absentmindedly scratched at his stubble. He didn't need to ask how Sam Asche could have gotten his number. That was obvious. Fully awake at last, he tried again.

"Sam, it's been..." Hopper tried to count backward.

"Ten years," Sam supplied without hesitation. "What are you doing these days?"

"I'm retired," Hopper said, less annoyed now at having been woken

up, than with the failed attempt at small talk. If the guy had tracked down Hopper's phone number, then he certainly knew he was retired. "You already know that. What's going on?"

"Yeah, I do. Sorry that... I'm sorry that I never called before. Sorry the first time you're hearing from me is like this," Sam said, choosing words, stumbling over them, and then choosing new ones.

"Like what?" Hopper asked, more concerned now than annoyed.

"I need your help," Sam said, after a long pause. Then, as if relieved that he'd finally gotten the words out, he rushed on. "I need to talk to you. I think you're- I think you might be the only one who'd understand."

"Listen," Hopper said with an apologetic half-laugh. "I'm not the Chief anymore. I don't know what kind of help you need, but these days I feed my dog and I go fishing and I change the oil in my truck."

"Please, Hop," Sam said, "I just need you to listen, and not think what I'm gonna say is crazy."

His voice suddenly sounded so haunted that Hopper gave up trying to argue. He'd never known the guy to be overly dramatic.

"Okay, I'm listening," Hopper said cautiously.

"Well, there's this case. Where do I even start?"

"You still in Indianapolis?" Hopper asked.

"No, I moved about four years ago," Sam told him. "I'm with the Sacramento Police department now. Anyway, there's this case. Five people dead, two of them cops."

Hopper swore sadly. "Friends of yours?"

"Yeah," Sam said, his voice catching. Hopper still didn't see how he could help in any way, but if all Sam needed was a grief counselor, then he was going to do his best.

"I don't know. Maybe this whole thing messed me up or something,"

Sam said. "I've been around, you know? I've lost people before. But now, I don't know. Maybe it's making me see things. Two days ago I was responding to a call and I saw..."

Hopper waited for him to go on, but he seemed to need a push.

"Yeah?" Hopper asked.

"Listen, you'll think I'm crazy. But... maybe you won't. I don't know."

"What?" Hopper pressed him, really curious at last.

"I thought to call you because I heard you go into some things."

"Sam?" Hopper said, the first note of alarm slipping into his voice.

"I heard some stories about what happened there in Hawkins ten years ago," Sam said, almost apologetically.

Hopper's stomach lurched. He hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary in ten years. Not a bugged phone, not a flickering light bulb, not even a weird shadow. Hawkins Lab was an empty, abandoned concrete brick these days, and Hawkins was a quiet place again where nothing unusual ever happened. But that was no reason to be stupid.

"Sam," he said slowly and clearly. "I think you should stop talking right now."

"Hop-"

"Sam!" He caught himself and spoke more quietly but just as clearly into the handset. "I don't know what you heard, but nothing happened in Hawkins ten years ago. Absolutely nothing happened, and if it did, you'd be crazy to talk about it over the phone."

"I just need you to listen to me, Hop," Sam begged.

Hopper sat in silence for a long moment just listening to the background buzz of the phone connection. He'd never known Sam to be careless. The guy knew how to talk over a police radio when anyone in the world might be listening in. He knew how to carefully

word a police report so that blame didn't end up on the wrong person. He knew which things you could say to a reporter and which things you could say to the Chief and which things you could only tell your partner. He wasn't stupid, and he wasn't careless. If it had been someone else, Hopper knew he would have hung up the phone then and there.

"Look, I wish I could help you," Hopper said, pressing the handset harder against his cheek. "But we can NOT talk about this."

"Then let me fly you out here," Sam said quickly.

"What?" Hopper laughed.

"It's not the money, Hop, it's my own sanity," Sam told him. "Everyone here thinks I'm crazy. The Chief wants to take me off the case. I think, I'm pretty sure you'll understand."

"I can't just fly out to, to, to California," Hopper said, waving a hand in the air as if the other could see him.

"You're retired," Sam said with just the faintest hint of a smile in his voice. "What else have you got to do?"

"It's not that, it's just..." Hopper realized he was having trouble coming up with reasons.

"Please, Hop, I need your help, real bad. Look, I'd offer you money, but I know you better than that. I'm asking for your help. I don't know what else I can do if you say no."

Hopper tried to think of any possible reason to say no, but in the end none of them mattered. The relief in Sam's voice when he finally agreed... Hopper had never heard his friend quite like that before. He warned Sam again to say nothing else about it over the phone, and Sam promised to explain everything when he picked him up at the airport. Placing the handset back on its cradle, Hopper stared around the bedroom and shook his head. Yesterday he'd spent his evening cleaning fish. If he'd known that the next morning he'd... have the conversation he'd just had, he might have unplugged the phone before going to sleep.

The smell of cooking eggs drew him out of his unpleasant thoughts. With his knees creaking as they did these days, he lifted himself out of bed and headed toward the kitchen.

"Joyce," he called. "You aren't going to like this."

With the familiar sound of the bell, the students of Hawkins Middle School's eighth grade class erupted from their chairs like a flock of birds and headed for the door. Mike Wheeler could hardly blame them. Since it was the last class on a Friday, the dismissal bell signaled the start of their weekend.

"Remember the test on Monday," he called over the noise of scraping chairs, zipping backpacks, and talking children, "which will cover Newton's 3 laws of motion in essay format." His voice trailed off as most of the kids were already out the door. Most of the kids had gone, but three stayed behind and rushed up to his desk, staring up at him expectantly.

"Did it come?" Little Danny asked.

"Sorry, kids," Mike said earnestly. "Nothing yet. You'll have to keep running your campaign without the new Monster Manual for a while longer."

"When are YOU going to start running a campaign for us again, Mr. Wheeler?" begged the second boy, Lenny.

"I'm sorry," Mike said again with a small smile. "I just don't have the time like I used to. The baby, you understand, right?"

"How IS the baby?" The third kid, blond and boisterous Amy, asked.

"Bigger every day," Mike said.

"Does she cry a lot?" Amy asked.

"Only when we're trying to sleep," Mike said, only half joking. "So where are the three of you going this weekend?" He asked.

"Into the Plane of Fire," Amy answered right away. "Lenny's ranger

found a Sword of Storms in a sunken shipwreck that can kill even fire demons."

"How's your Cleric doing, Danny?" Mike asked, putting the last of his papers into his case and zipping it closed.

"Dead," Danny answered, his face falling sadly. "Got eaten by a Tarasque."

"Oh," Mike said, a little surprised. He looked over at Amy. "Isn't a Tarasque a bit much to throw at them until they're higher level?"

She shrugged. "The old man at the tavern warned them not to go in the Cave of Fear. It's not my fault they didn't listen to him."

"Ah," Mike said, understanding completely. "Well, tell me how the Plane of Fire was on Monday." He turned to leave.

"And-" Danny started.

"And, if the new Monster Manual comes over the weekend, I'll give it to you first thing Monday," Mike assured them. "Happy gaming." With that he was out in the halls, the very familiar halls, of Hawkins Middle School. He watched the kids streaming out to begin their glorious weekend. He'd walked, and run, those same halls countless times on his way to class, or to AV club, or on his way home to continue a D&D campaign with his friends. He'd done other things at Hawkins Middle, too. Things he couldn't talk about with anyone who hadn't witnessed it with their own eyes. For most people, monsters didn't exist. Alternate dimensions didn't exist. Little girls who could kill you with their brain didn't exist. For the most part, that was still true, even for Mike.

Principal Clark caught Mike's eye and waved to him cheerfully from the other end of the hall as Mike slipped through the door and out into the teacher parking lot. Mike waved back, just as cheerfully, but he didn't stop to talk so often anymore. These days, he was always as eager to get home after work as the kids were after school.

El Wheeler leaned over the kitchen table, her eyes flicking back and

forth between the open pages of a pair of books, one of which, The Hobbit, she was reading for the first time. Off to the side of the table was a small stack of books she'd recently finished. Carl Sagan's The Cosmos, Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist, and Ernest Hemingway's Old Man and the Sea. That one she didn't fully understand, and would have to come back to.

She always went by "El," but if anyone really asked what it was short for, she pretended it was Eleanor, which wasn't her favorite name, but it was plausible enough to forestall awkward questions. A handful of times in her life El had tried being completely honest with new acquaintances about where she had come from, but she had learned that wasn't a very productive line of conversation. Most people had trouble getting past the secret government lab and the experiments and her wild escape. Conversations usually got stuck right then and there, so El had given up on telling the real story. She and her adoptive family had used a number of different cover stories over the years to explain where she'd come from and why she was... different. Those stories ranged from Sweden to Alaska to Utah. Any place far away that the people of Hawkins weren't familiar enough with.

She looked up from The Hobbit to glance at the TV, at one of the three TVs she often kept running at the same time. She couldn't limit herself to only one channel. There was just too much she needed to know. One TV was showing her the Weather Channel, but the one that had caught her attention was showing her a man in a suit named Reverend Billy Graham. TVs were almost as good as books for learning what she'd missed during the first half of her life. Hawkins Lab had taught her how to read, though she'd never been given any interesting books. Apart from that, they'd given her years and years of brain puzzles to solve, mostly because they'd wanted to understand and categorize what she could do, but she'd never been taught anything like history or science. They wanted her to be functional, so she could be the most useful to them, but anything beyond that had been unnecessary. In fact, the very concept of history had been totally alien to her when the Wheeler family had first given her books to read. Edward Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire had been a complete shock to her, and she'd had to go through it four times before she really understood. Then she had needed to learn the difference between things that really were history, like that book, and

things that only sounded like history, like The Hobbit.

"You go immediately after you die to face the judgment," Reverend Billy Graham on the TV said. "And the judgment is not going to decide whether you are saved or lost. The judgment is going to decide your place in hell." El studied the screen for a moment then tried the words out loud herself. "To decide your place in hell," she said. His accent was a little harder than most for her to copy.

Even after ten years of living in Hawkins, people still thought she had an accent. She didn't, not really. It wasn't as if El had grown up speaking something other than English. It was just that the timing of her speech and the words she chose were never exactly like what the every day people of Hawkins used. Unless she really, really tried to imitate another person's fast and careless way of speaking, she stood out as being different. In the end, she'd found it easiest to tell people that's she'd grown up Amish. Once she'd learned that the Amish existed, she'd found it to be the perfect lie. There were enough of them in Indiana, though none in Hawkins, which meant that people she met in Hawkins knew just enough about the Amish to find it a plausible explanation for her weirdness, but not enough to see through the lie.

It wasn't that El couldn't act "normal" if she was purposely trying to act. She'd gotten fairly good at people-watching over the years, and if she really wanted to mimic another person, it wasn't too difficult. But acting took conscious effort, and whenever she relaxed the act and reverted to behaving like "herself" again, she stood out from everyone else. Since she hadn't grown up surrounded by brothers and sisters or classmates, she didn't naturally do the things they did or say the things they said. When she was in a room with other people, inevitably at some point she would find herself sitting while they were standing, or standing while they were sitting, or she would stare at something a half second too long, or she wouldn't laugh at the right moment, or she would react to a word that no one else did, or she wouldn't react to a word that everyone else did. Some people didn't mind it, but other people found it so distracting that they just had to come out and ask El who she was and where she was from, hoping for something that would explain the weirdness.

At least her friends growing up, Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Will hadn't

minded. It wasn't that they didn't find her weird, or at least unusual. They did. But after a while it didn't bother them and, since they were among the very few who knew her whole history, she didn't have to pretend around them.

The one thing she never, ever, under any circumstances, revealed to new people, though, were the special things she could do that they couldn't. Anyone who couldn't turn on a light switch without touching it, which was everyone but El, couldn't conceive such a thing was possible. Even before she'd escaped the lab and started to meet the normal people of Hawkins, El had known she was different. It had been the entire focus of her upbringing. Every single day of the first half of her life people would come to see her and ask her to do things that they couldn't. Sometimes it was Dr. Brenner and the other doctors, orderlies, and techs who worked at the lab. Sometimes it was new people in suits or white labcoats that she'd never met before. Always they asked her to do something that they couldn't do themselves. Crush a coke can. Pick up a pencil. Open a door. Close a door. Read words off a paper that only someone else could see. It usually fascinated them, the things she could do with her mind, and El never wanted that kind of attention. Sometimes is frightened them, and El had never wanted that, either. Back then, the people coming to see her do various tricks with her mind had at least WANTED to see those things. Now, if she walked into Donald's General Store or the Hawk Movie Theater, the people she passed and bumped into and said "hi" to DIDN'T want to see those things. They didn't want to know the things she could do, so she didn't tell them. El was always careful never to let them see. Here in her house, she could do things in safety without anyone finding out.

She glanced away from Billy Graham on the TV to the baby's crib in the living room to make sure it was rocking at just the right speed and rhythm that the baby liked. Making a crib move from side to side from across the room was easy, but there were other things that weren't easy. Over the years, she'd learned her limits. She'd learned which things she could do easily, and which things would leave her lying in a dazed state on the couch for hours afterward. It had been a long, long time since she'd even gotten a nose bleed from using her abilities, because she'd gotten better at some things, and learned which other things were just too taxing to be safe. After flipping a

van over hear head once, she'd never needed to do it again, thankfully.

Some things were just too small and intricate to be practical. Tying her shoes or eating with a fork and knife were just so much easier to do with her own hands, but closing a door or calling the baby's teddy bear over from across the room were easy. Again she glanced up from the book to look at the TV.

"All men should be saved," Billy Graham was saying. "That's God's desire."

"That's God's Desiahhh," El tried.

"He wants it so much that he gave his son to die on the cross for you," Billy Graham said.

"To dahh on the cross faaw you," El said, doing her best with the unusual accent. Her eyes flicked over to the third TV where a theme song had just come on.

"And I'd like to take a minute, just sit right there," the song went. "And I'll tell you how I became the prince of a town called Bel Air."

As a companion to books, TV was invaluable for helping El to understand some of the things she'd missed during the first half of her life. The people in Hawkins, and the other places she'd visited, just knew so much more STUFF. Whether they were smart or not, the sheer amount of stuff they had seen and heard over their lifetimes astounded El, so she had dedicated herself to catching up.

"No, it's cool Ash," Will Smith was saying to his little cousin, "Look, I'm about to get this party started right. Alright kids, check it out. I'm Ashley's cousin Will, right? And I'm about to hip you all to this new style dancing."

"An' I'm 'bout ta hip y'all to dis new style dancin," El practiced. She had always found Will Smith's accent to be much easier to copy, even if it was a bit erratic and inconsistent.

The faint sound of a dog barking across the street drew her attention. El craned her neck to look out the kitchen window. As she'd

expected, Boris the Labrador, who belonged to the Gillespies several houses down, had gotten loose again and was sniffing around a tree across the street. She kept half an eye on him as she continued reading The Hobbit, because she expected very soon little Billy Gillespie would come racing down the sidewalk after his dog, who liked to run away and lead the boy on a chase. Fun though it always was for the dog, the problem was the boy's grandmother, Old Mrs. Gillespie, always came down on him hard for being careless enough to let Boris run off and destroy the neighbors' gardens. El planned to help the boy out this time, and spare him another lecture from his grandmother.

"And in other news," the woman on the Weather Channel said. "It looks like more hurricanes in Miami."

She slid The Hobbit aside and opened one of the other books on the table: "Learn Spanish Fast and Easy. Guaranteed!"

"*Y en otros noticias*," El said, flipping through in search of the page she wanted. "*Parece mas huracanes en Miami*." When she'd found the page she was looking for, she frowned at herself. She'd said "otros" instead of "otras." A rookie mistake.

The Spanish was a new project for El. For a brief time the lab had actually tried to teach her Russian. Dr. Brenner had brought in a man who always wore a gray suit and blue tie who would sit with El for three hours a day and try to teach her the foreign language. It had been her first ever experience with a language that wasn't English. Before that, she'd just assumed everyone in the world (however big that might have been) spoke English. Learning Russian hadn't been that difficult, but as soon as Dr. Brenner had found that El could simply broadcast words back to him over a speaker, and that she didn't need to actually know Russian to spy on the Russians, he'd discontinued the lessons as a waste of time. Some years after coming to live with the Wheelers, El had considered getting a book and trying to learn the language again. Ted Wheeler had been a bit alarmed that anyone in his house might be speaking Russian, and when El later learned that literally no one in Hawkins, and barely anyone in all of America spoke Russian, she'd given up the idea.

A small tickle in the back of her mind told her to look out the

window again. There he was, little Billy Gillespie running down the sidewalk. A second later, Boris saw him and barked happily, then took off at full speed, hoping Billy would follow. As had happened before, El knew the boy could run all day and never catch his dog, and when Old Mrs. Gillespie had to come get them both in the car, she'd let him have it. Instead, El leaned as close to the window pane as she could and focused on the dog's rear left paw. She drew in a breath, held it, and squeezed just a little. Across the street, Boris stopped in mid stride, one paw suddenly glued to the grass. He looked back and tugged at it, probably wondering what kind of root or vine he'd gotten tangled in. El kept him there until little Billy caught up to his dog, unaware but happy about his good luck, and scooped Boris up in his arms. El watched the boy walk away with a small smile. When he was out of sight, she turned back to make sure the baby's crib was still rocking just right, then returned her attention to the Hobbit.

A few minutes later, the crunch of tires on gravel told her that Mike was home. Good, she thought. Something about The Hobbit had been bothering her, and Mike was a Hobbit expert. She flicked her eyes toward the front door. The knob turned and it swung part way open.

It no longer surprised Mike when the front door of his house popped open before he could even reach the knob, or when the TV came on or changed channels seemly of its own will. Such little oddities were commonplace when living with El. He'd gotten used to them, and they didn't even serve to remind him anymore of greater supernatural things. They'd become a mundane part of his life, to the point where he rarely if ever thought about the bizarre and impossible series of events that had led to him meeting El ten years ago.

She was inside, standing over the kitchen table with her head bent over a pair of books. The sounds of three different TV channels competed with each other for his attention. Yet more things that he took as normal these days.

He could tell from El's body language that she must have been waiting to ask him an important question all day.

"Mike," she said as he reached the table. She picked up one of the two

books and plopped it down closer to him. He glanced down at The Hobbit, and then back up at her.

"The Eagles." She began.

"How's Allie?" Mike asked, before he delved into a hard to explain tangent.

"Asleep," El told him, inclining her head toward the living room. Mike leaned back until he could see through he open doorway where the baby's crib stood, gently rocking by itself.

"The Eagles," El said again. She still spent words as if they cost twenty dollars each. Mike had always known her to be that way.

"Okay, the Eagles," he said, deciding that he'd go check on the baby after he tackled the problem of the Eagles.

"Why don't they carry the Dwarves all the way to the Misty Mountains?" She asked.

"Oh," Mike said, considering the answer. "Well, I guess it's not really the Eagle's fight, you know? Getting their treasure and their mountain back from the dragon is the Dwarves' mission."

"But the Eagles could help," El said.

"They could, I guess," Mike said. "But it's not their responsibility. The Eagles just live out there in the wild... just being Eagles. They don't worry about treasure and Dwarven kingdoms."

El frowned skeptically, and Mike was considering whether he should defend Tolkien and his Eagles more vigorously when he was struck with a sudden wave of danger.

It felt dark, and cold, and frightening.

It was a feeling he sometimes got, always around El, always when she sensed something was wrong.

Her head snapped around toward the living room and the baby's crib. Mike was aware of hearing the baby give the smallest of cries, like

she was having a bad dream.

Then he smelled smoke.

Suddenly the kitchen was hot. He could feel heat pouring in waves from their living room. El bolted past him and through the door way. With two panicked and stumbling steps he was right behind her. Half of the living room was already engulfed in bright orange flames. The couch, the carpet, the TV, and the baby's crib were already burning. In the time that he stared, frozen in wide eyed horror, which must half been less than half a second, the fire spread to swallow up the entire living room, walls, floor, ceiling, and all. Bright tongues of flame began to dance toward the kitchen, toward Mike and El, and he took a reflex step back from the unbearable heat.

He tried to scream "Allie," but his lungs filled up with smoke and air that was too hot to breath. The word came out only as a choking cough. He couldn't even see the crib anymore, the fire had grown so large. Next to him, El reached out with one hand, and the baby came floating through the leaping flames like a football to land in her arms. She pointed him toward their front door and yelled "Go!"

Literally shaking with the adrenaline from believing his baby to be gone and then seeing her alive again almost literally within the same second, he turned and scrambled for the door, reaching toward the knob with an unsteady hand. El was faster, though, and she blasted the door before the two of them reached it. The in-swing door was blown off its hinges and flew out into their front yard in a shower of splinters. Mike and El ran through, and kept running until they reached the side of the road.

When El stopped running, Mike reached out with shaking hands to inspect the baby. Biting down on his worst fears, he expected to find her skin burned and blistered and nearly gone. Amazingly, baby Allie's skin was as pink and perfect as ever. Somehow, the flames hadn't touched her. She was as naked as the day he'd first held her, though, and Mike briefly wondered if her clothes had burned off, though it would have been impossible for the fire to have burned the clothes and not the baby. Now she was squirming and fussing, but not crying, almost unaware of what had just gone on around her.

Puzzled but relieved beyond words, Mike turned back to stare at their house. El was staring, too. Smoke was pouring out of the windows and rising in a big plume into the sky. In the few seconds it had taken them to cross their front lawn, the fire had spread from a single room to envelope the entire house. Mike had never seen anything like it.

As he stared at the house, which was now beginning to crumble in places, the words "What happened" floated into his mind, but he didn't say them out loud. In the back of his mind, he knew. It was yet another one of those things that Mike had turned normal in his own mind. He hardly ever thought about it consciously, because if he tried to put it into words, he would have to admit how inexplicable, how fantastical, how impossible it was.

But it wasn't impossible, clearly.

2. Chapter 2

Firebaby - Chapter 2

Agent Jack Smith yawned and took another sip from his coffee. He was afraid his body was building up an immunity to caffeine, since it no longer did what he wanted it to do. He'd probably consumed more coffee on this last assignment than in all his life put together.

Two years in Army Intelligence and he'd been scooped up by the CIA. He came with impeccable test scores and outstanding remarks from his superior officers. Immeasurably proud of the title "Agent," Smith had dreamed of playing deadly chess against Communist Block spies.

And then the whole Cold War had ended and Smith found himself reassigned to watching high-value domestic persons of interest, and he'd begun drinking coffee by the gallon. Today he was staking out a house from the boring comfort of his car. Sometimes he watched from a park bench,pretending to read a newspaper. Sometimes he ordered lunch at a restaurant and watched from his table. Sometimes he actually got a climb a tree and watch through a pair of binoculars. That was at least slightly more exciting.

Smith took another sip of his coffee as he gazed disinterestedly at the Wheeler household a short distance down the street. He glanced down at the note he'd jotted down a few minutes earlier. "3:15 PM. Mike Wheeler arrived home." He'd written that same sentence five days a week for months now. It seemed that Mr. Wheeler was a creature of habit. He was a creature of boredom, as far as Smith was concerned.

There was a tiny hint of movement at the house. One of the Wheelers must have walked past a window. It didn't much matter to Smith. As far as his orders were concerned, it didn't matter what they did, as long as they were where they were supposed to be when they were supposed to be there. Months of experience had taught Smith that routine was unlikely to be broken.

Paradrop insertion training. Active service in Kuwait. Higher test scores than General Robert E Lee himself. And he got assigned to

watch an all American nuclear family live out their lives at the end of a cul-de-sac.

He took another sip from his coffee...

...And chocked, spitting it all over his steering wheel. Fire. He could see fire through the Wheeler's living room window.

Smith snatched up his radio from the passenger seat.

"This is Agent Smith at the Wheeler residence. There seems to be..." It was unmistakable now. He could see bright orange flames dancing behind the glass. "There's a fire," he said into the radio. "The house is on fire."

There was a short hiss of static before the reply came. "Agent Smith, this is control, what is the status of the subjects?"

Smith opened his car door and half stood with one foot on the ground and one foot still in the car to get a better look. His hand on the door frame tensed, ready to move if he had to.

"Agent Smith, please advise," the radio squawked.

Smith saw the front door explode, literally explode, off its hinges as the Wheeler family ran outside.

"I have a visual on all three subjects," Smith said into the radio.

"Acknowledged," Control said. "What is the situation?"

The house was going up like fireworks before Smith's very eyes. He'd never seen a fire spread that fast, not even when he'd watched a Kuwaiti oil field get hit by a misfired scud missile. He swept his head around to take in the surroundings, half expecting to find a Communist spy with a shoulder fired rocket launcher, but there was nothing. The neighborhood was as quiet and tranquil as any other day, except for that one house blazing away like Chernobyl.

"Agent Smith, what is the situation?"

He made one last sweep of the area to reassure himself. The Wheelers

were standing at the edge of their front lawn, watching their house go up like a box of matches, but nothing else seemed to be out of place in the peaceful little neighborhood. All his senses and combat instincts told him that the danger, whatever it had been, was past.

"Stable," he said into the radio. "Situation is stable."

Someone must have called the fire department, but by the time they arrived, Mike's house was a pile of charcoal and ash. He was no firefighter himself, but he was pretty sure houses didn't burn down that fast. When the big red trucks did show up, they'd had little to do except hose down the embers and make sure the fire didn't spread to any other houses. They'd been eager to check on the Wheeler's health, but aside from the few lungfuls of smoke they'd breathed in, they were fine, especially Allie. Mike still had trouble believing that the baby gotten out untouched by the fire, but she had. The medics had given them a blanket to wrap the baby in, and El sat on the tailgate of one of the ambulances, rocking the baby and talking and humming to her in the odd half spoken language that only they shared.

The whole fire department had shown up, because it was Hawkins, and what else were they going to do. The fire chief trudged over to Mike in his heavy rubber jacket.

"Still have no idea what caused it," the chief said. "It wasn't a gas explosion, and there's no electrical fire or kitchen fire that would go that fast. You sure you weren't keeping a couple dozen gallons of gasoline in your living room? Or a pallet of firecrackers?"

Mike shook his head distantly.

"You'll want to call the State Farm guy straight away," the chief went on. "As long as they can't prove it was arson, they'll pay up. This... wasn't some insurance scam, was it?"

"What?" Mike said, alarmed. "No! We barely made it out alive."

"Alright, alright," the chief said, waving a calming hand. "I've just seen it a few times in my day, you know. So, you folks have a place

to stay for now?" Mike told him that they did, and the chief went to round up his people and take them back to the station. Mike had already been considering his options with El. They could go to his parents' house, of course, which was only just across town, but he was honestly afraid to put them in danger like that. Until today he didn't know such a thing was even possible, yet it had happened, and with almost no warning at all. He had no idea if or when it might happen again, and he didn't want to risk turning his parents' house into a fireball, too. They could get a hotel room, but he wasn't sure how long it would be before they could get the insurance money and move into a new house. He couldn't afford weeks and months in a hotel, and he was also a little afraid of what kind of legal trouble he'd be in if they burned down the whole hotel. Mike had been wringing his hands and tossing out different options to El for the past half hour. They couldn't sleep in the forest, but he was honestly afraid of bringing baby Allie inside any wooden structure at the moment. His mind began to wander to other problems, as well. He'd need to call State Farm, which wouldn't be too hard, since he knew the local agent, Steve, pretty well. He'd need to call Principal Clark and arrange for a substitute teacher for Monday, and tell him that this past week's worth of homework papers to be graded had been in his briefcase, which had been in the house, which was now nothing but ashes. Maybe he could give the kids a really easy pop quiz to make up for it. Luckily he hadn't had the time to take his wallet out of his pocket when he'd gotten home, so he still had his driver's license and credit card. Even their car was gone, for which Mike cursed himself for parking too close to the house.

As the fire trucks began to pull away, he sat back down next to El and put a hand on her shoulder. "What do you think about Dustin's house?" He asked.

She looked up from the baby and considered the question for a moment, then nodded in agreement.

"Hi guys!" Dustin said, throwing his front door open wide and looking out at Mike, El, and the baby. "If you'd told me you were coming over, I would have ordered a pizza."

"I'm really sorry to show up like this Dustin-" Mike began, but Dustin

had already wrapped him in a bear hug. He did the same for El, but was careful not to squish the baby.

"Come on," he said, pulling Mike inside by the sleeve. "Let me show you what I've been working on."

"I'm sorry about this," Mike tried again, but Dustin wasn't listening.

"Sorry about the mess," Dustin said, sweeping his hand around the living room, which was decorated with a few pizza boxes, empty VHS cases, candy wrappers, and more than a few used paper plates. "Do you want a Mountain Dew?" He asked, waving in the general direction of his kitchen. "Here it is," he patted the top of his huge, 12 inch computer monitor. "Windows 3.1," he told Mike proudly. Scooping up a few scattered papers from the computer desk, he handed them to Mike with a big grin. "I've been working on some new business models. I'm telling you, this internet thing is going to change the world. I need to be on the ground floor." He ejected a floppy disk from its drive and waved it at the two of them. "If even one of my ideas pays off, it could be worth millions. Millions."

"That's great Dustin," Mike said. "I need to talk to you about why we're here."

"Oh yeah, sit, sit," Dustin said, drawing them over toward his couch. He took an old T shirt off of the couch's arm and tossed it in the direction of a laundry basket. "You guys don't come over much these days. The last time I saw the princess she was about half this size." Dustin leaned closer to the baby. "Hi Allie," he said, waving a finger in front of her eyes as if she was a cat that he thought was going to chase after the finger.

"Dustin, we came here to ask you for help," Mike interrupted, realizing that his friend wouldn't slow down enough for him to approach the subject gently.

"What's wrong?" Dustin said, his eyes going wide.

"Nothing," Mike said, trying to bring Dustin's reaction to a lower level. "I mean, we're all OK. But we need somewhere to stay."

"Are you hiding from someone?" Dustin asked, his eyes going wide. "Are you guys on the run?"

"No," Mike said, annoyed that he was going to have to be direct, or risk leading Dustin down a million different wild possibilities. "We... There was a fire at our house."

Dustin gasped. "So you guys are homeless?"

"No," Mike said. "I mean-"

"Yes," El said, her quiet voice catching Dustin's attention.

He flopped down on the couch, raking his fingers through his mop of hair. "Whoa," Dustin said.

"Yes, I guess we technically don't have a house right now," Mike amended. "We need somewhere to stay, just for a few days. Just until we straighten things out. We were wondering-"

"Mike! Of course you can stay," Dustin interrupted. "Consider this your new home." He took his fingers out of his hair and touched his chin thoughtfully. "I only have the one bedroom, but you guys can have that. I'll take the couch."

"We couldn't-" Mike tried, but Dustin didn't seem to hear him.

"We'll need to get a crib for the baby," Dustin said, and began counting items on his fingers. "Some more groceries. You guys will need new clothes. I can rent some movies for us. I should start making dinner. No, that'll take too long. I'll order a pizza."

"Dustin, you don't have to-" Mike tried again.

"Mike, will you give it a rest?" Dustin said in exasperation. "I'm HERE for you. Now that you're under my protection, it's my sword duty to render all the assistance I can. Party rules."

Mike sank deeper into the couch, some of the tension going out of his muscles for the first time in hours. "Thanks," he said, looking down at the carpet. El leaned over and put a hand on Dustin's arm.

"Thank you, Dustin," she said.

He beamed at them.

Jack Smith squinted into the setting sun, lost in thought. He had a very narrow window of time to work with. He glanced back at the handful of techs who were collecting samples from the pile of ashes that had once been the Wheeler house. The Higher-Ups wanted to know exactly what had happened in the sleepy little town of Hawkins after a decade of peace and quiet. Of course, it was just like them not to take notice until something went catastrophically wrong. Yesterday, the Wheeler family had been on the back burner, as far as the Higher-Ups were concerned. Suddenly they were among the top priorities. They needed to know how a house with modern fire safety standards had burned to the ground in a handful of minutes, and more importantly why, of all places, it happened to be the home of a family designated as "high value domestic persons of interest." Smith had his theories, but he would keep them to himself until the scientists analyzed their data. For now, it was enough for him that the Higher-Ups wanted to know things, and they were finally willing to throw men and money at the situation to find the answers.

Smith himself had finally been taken off of surveillance duty and put in charge of the task force. Men in suits and men in camouflage and men in lab coats were already en route. He often remarked that the big and bulky federal government could move FAST when they wanted to. They just didn't want to all that often. But here they were, and it had only taken a minor explosion to get them moving. His window had opened up. For a short time he would have all the resources he needed. It was up to him to make sure they were used the right way for the right reasons. It was up to him to learn exactly what had happened here, and exactly what the Wheeler family was capable of that the Higher-Ups didn't already know about.

"This is my Celestron Powerseeker," Dustin said with immeasurable pride, as he unfolded the tripod legs. "I'll show you guys Mars when it gets dark later." He patted the long black tube lovingly. "Did you know the moon was at Perigee back in March? I swear, it looked this big," he spread his hands in a big circle above his head. "I wish I'd

had it two years ago so I could have seen the Smith-Thompson comet that hit Russia. That was a once in a lifetime thing. Sorry, let me get you those Mountain Dews I promised." Dustin disappeared into the kitchen for a moment, and Mike took the moment to survey El and the baby. They both seemed oddly calm to him, given the situation. Dustin reappeared and handed them the bright green cans. Mike accepted his politely, but didn't open it. El did.

"So a fire, huh?" Dustin asked. "Weird. What started it?"

"Electrical fire," Mike lied. He glanced sideways at El, but she didn't call him out on it.

"I should probably get batteries for my smoke detectors," Dustin said to himself. Then he looked back to Mike. "How is Hawkins Middle?"

Mike shrugged. "The same as ever, I guess."

"And Mr. Clarke?" Dustin asked.

"He's gotten a lot done since becoming the new Principal," Mike said. "He's created the first ever Indiana State AV club, and to honor its first year, they're going to let Hawkins host the Indiana Science Fair next year."

"Man," Dustin said, shaking his head. "The kids these days don't know how great they have it. Make sure you tell them what it was like for us. Remember that year we had to go all the way to Hammond for the state science fair? That was the year we gave a presentation on the probability of other dimensions." He looked over to El. "They graded us down because our premise was, and I quote, too theoretical. If they only knew."

The baby squirmed in El's arms for a moment, and then settled back down.

"Did she just point at my home video library?" Dustin asked.

"I don't think so," Mike said.

Dustin twisted around to look at his shelf. "I think she might have been pointing at the Star Wars trilogy," he said. He crossed the room

and plucked the trilogy boxed set off his shelf and held it out toward the baby. "Hey, Allie, is this what you want?"

"She doesn't know-" Mike started.

"Have you shown her Star Wars yet? Are you bringing her up right, Mike?"

"One year olds don't understand movies, Dustin," Mike told him.

Dustin leaned in closer to the baby. Suddenly his eyes lit up. "I'm going to get her a stuffed Ewok," he announced. "She needs to know about Ewoks."

Jim Hopper found Sam waiting right outside the Sacramento airport, thankfully. The man looked to have put on about twenty pounds and had gone fully gray at the temples since Hopper had seen him last. Aside from that, Sam needed a shave, looked like he hadn't slept in two days, and was wearing plain clothes instead of his uniform. Hopper could sympathize.

"Thanks so much for... for coming," Sam said, shaking hopper's hand. He leaned awkwardly as if he'd intended to offer a hug, but changed his mind half way through. They'd been that close once, but it had been a long time. Hopper tried to ease the moment a little.

"You look almost as old and tired as me," he said.

Sam laughed, which did a little to brighten his bloodshot eyes. "You actually look better than I expected. You must like being retired."

"I don't have to climb trees to save cats anymore," Hopper said. "And I don't have to pick up teenagers trespassing at the Sattler Quarry. So I guess the retired life is pretty good."

"You don't miss the excitement?" Sam asked.

"Not really," Hopper told him. "I've had enough excitement."

"In Hawkins?"

"You'd be surprised," Hopper said, reaching in his pocket to take out a cigarette. He was down to just a few a day, but the plane ride had been long and cramped, with a crying kid behind him. He offered one to Sam who took it and waved a hand toward his truck. "Come on, let me buy you a drink."

"You on duty?" Hopper asked with one eyebrow raised.

"I'm only gonna have have one," Sam said. "And no, I'm not on duty."

"So what made you move out to California?" Hopper asked as he slid into the passenger seat of Sam's own truck. Not his squad car, Hopper noted.

"Sacramento pays way better than Indianapolis," Sam told him. "Way better than any place in Indiana."

"It's the taxes," Hopper grumbled. "What do they make you pay for gas over here? A dollar ten?"

"A dollar twenty," Sam told him.

"Robbery," Hopper said.

The drive to Sam's grill-and-bar of choice wasn't far, but he seemed unwilling to bring up the big issue, so Hopper did his best to make small talk. It was an odd feeling, riding shotgun with Sam again. They'd done it every day of the week for a few years, except that it had been in a squad car instead of an F-150. They'd been a great pair until Hopper had left the force and tried to drink himself to death. If his liver hadn't been so freakishly robust, he might have succeeded, too. But that had been before taking the job as Hawkins police chief. Since he'd left Indianapolis fifteen years ago, he hadn't spoken to Sam except for a single phone call when he'd needed an address for one Terry Ives. At the time, Hopper had been focused on the task at hand, and sort of on the run from Hawkins Lab, so he hadn't wasted any time on small talk.

Once they'd been given a table at the grill-and-bar and served their drinks, Sam seemed at last ready to really talk.

"Thanks again for coming. I mean it," Sam said.

Hopper shrugged as graciously as he could and sipped his beer. He sipped rather than chugged, which was another improvement he'd made over recent years.

"And I'm sorry about all that stuff on the phone about... what happened in Hawkins... then years ago..." Sam grew quieter with each word, hunched his shoulders and leaned in close, as if he thought there were agents right behind him.

Hopper waved his beer in dismissal. "Don't worry about it. And don't mention it. I mean really, don't mention it. What happened then is supposed to be dead and buried. No sense in bringing up the dead."

Sam still looked a little puzzled, and maybe a little too curious, but he didn't press any harder.

"So I'm here now," Hopper said. "Give it to me. WHY and I here?"

"Where should I start?" Sam said, partly to himself. He ran his fingers nervously through his hair. "Like I said, there's this case. It's crazy. It sounds crazy. They all think I'm crazy. The Chief. The boys at the station. Well, the ones I told, anyway. The Chief told me to stop spreading this around-"

"Is there some kind of cover up?" Hopper asked.

"No, I don't think so. Nothing like that," Sam said. "I told you, it sounds crazy. If somebody told me what they saw, I wouldn't believe 'em. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes-"

"Come on," Hopper said, starting to get impatient.

"So I responded to this call," Sam said, staring down at his hands as he spoke. "Somebody had called 911 and said they heard gunshots. The dispatcher called over the radio, and it turns out I'm only a few blocks away. By the time I get there, the whole building's on fire. Now, this building, we've had our eye on it for a while. We were pretty sure a major gang banger was using it to store drugs. But here it is, going up like a bonfire. So I call all available units to the scene, and the fire department and everybody else. But before they get there I go take a closer look, cause maybe there are people still alive inside.

So when I get close enough to look in a window-" Sam's hands clenched around his beer as he spoke. "So inside I see this guy. He's walking through the fire. I mean walking right through it, like it isn't even there. The whole building is going up. Flames ten feet high, and he's walking around in there. And he's-" Sam finally let go of his beer to stretch one arm out point it at Hopper with the fingers tense and claw-like. "He's got his hands like this and he's setting the place on fire. I mean, he wasn't carrying a napalm gun from Vietnam. It's just his hands, his bare hands, and he's... throwing fire all over the place."

"Nobody else saw him?" Hopper asked. "When the other squad cars and the firefighters showed up?"

Sam shook his head. "I couldn't stay close enough to watch him for long. The fire was getting worse every second, once the building started falling apart, I had to get back, so I lost track of him. We couldn't send any officers inside to look for survivors or perps or anything, not with the whole place coming down. The firefighters did what they could, but the whole building was basically gone before they could get to work."

"And then?"

"Then I went back to the station and wrote my report," Sam said. "I wrote down exactly what I saw. And the chief said I was out of my mind. He ripped it up and told me to write it again, this time without the comic book stuff. When I argued with him, he started talking about putting me on medical leave."

"Nobody else saw it happen?" Hopper asked.

"Just me," Sam said. "I started asking everybody who responded to the call that night. They all thought I was crazy, too. Pretty soon, the Chief told me to stop spreading it around. Then he started talking about medical leave again. He seemed to think I was coming up with delusions. That I was unstable. But I know what I saw."

"Well, I don't think you're crazy..." Hopper said grudgingly.

"Have you ever-"

"No, Hopper said with a short laugh. "I've never seen a guy move fire around with his hands. But..."

"But you believe me?"

"If you saw it, then you saw it," Hopper said.

"That's not weird to you?" Sam said in surprise.

"No, it weird," Hopper allowed. "But I've seen weird before. Listen, if you really did see this guy-"

"I did," Sam insisted.

"Are you sure you really want to keep chasing this thing?" Hopper asked. "It might be easier for you and the Chief and everybody else if you just forget it ever happened."

"Eight people died in that building, Hop," Sam said. "Burned to death. At the very least, we have an arsonist on the loose who should be charged with eight counts of murder."

"There's no way he could have been one of those eight bodies they found in the building?" Hopper asked.

"That's what the chief thinks," Sam said unhappily. "He thinks the eight bodies all belonged to the guys who used the warehouse to store their product. He thinks all the chemicals they were warehousing for their drug operations just spontaneously ignited and that's why the building burned down so fast."

"That sounds pretty good to me," Hopper said.

"There was at least one more person in that building before it was safe for us to start searching for bodies," Sam insisted. "And I know he didn't die in the fire. He was just fine with it, like a fish in the water."

"Sometimes, with these things, it's just best to close your eyes," Hopper told him. "Pretend it never happened."

"Now way," Sam said, shaking his head. "What if it happens again?"

Mike had been wrestling with his conscience all evening. He kept looking uneasily from Dustin to El, though neither seemed to be laboring under the same weight he was. El was spreading here attention between the baby, Dustin, the TV, and a book in her lap. Dustin was offering commentary on the TV, which Mike only heard as background noise.

"I don't know about this Leno guy yet," Dustin offered to El. "He's funny, but I don't know if he has the staying power that Carson did. I'll be right back, I'm gonna get another Mountain Dew. You want one?"

As soon as Dustin had left the couch, Mike decided he couldn't put it off any longer, so he took the opportunity to get Dustin alone and followed him out of the living room.

"Dustin, I need to tell you something," Mike said, taking the other's arm and gently pulling him further into the kitchen where they could talk. He didn't bother turning on the light, so they stood there in the half darkness for a long moment with the quiet murmur of the living room TV covering the otherwise awkward silence.

"What is it?" Dustin asked, as Mike struggled for the right words to begin his confession.

"You deserve to know," Mike began, then stopped. "I should have told you when we first got here," he tried again. "Or maybe I should have told you a long time ago... It just isn't fair that we're here, in your house, and I haven't told you yet..." Again he stopped, struggling with how to bring up such a subject.

"Spit it out," Dustin encouraged, his face inviting Mike to go on.

"It's about baby Allie," Mike began.

"Does she have superpowers, too?!" Dustin gasped, his eyes going wide and bright. "Is that what happened to your house?"

"Will you keep your voice down?" Mike hissed in a loud whisper, pulling Dustin even further away from the living room and then interposing himself as if his body could block the sound from

traveling. He glanced over his should at El, who was still sitting on the couch and holding the baby. She gave no indication that she could hear the two of them talking, but that didn't mean much. With a resigned sigh, Mike decided there wasn't much point in worrying about it. El would probably know anyway, if not now, then whenever she talked to Dustin next. She had a way of knowing things that people said, even if they weren't in the same room, or sometimes in the same building.

"It's not like that," Mike insisted, returning his attention to Dustin. "I mean, it is. Kind of. But it's not like that."

"I always guessed you'd have a baby with superpowers," Dustin said, grinning from ear to ear. "With El's... I mean, the way El is... you know. I just always guessed if you two had a baby-"

"She doesn't have superpowers," Mike said. "She's a normal, happy baby girl. And she's going to grow up to go to a normal school and have a normal, happy life."

"Normal?" Dustin protested. "Mike, that's not what you want. She can't be normal. She'll be better than normal. Way better."

"This is serious, Dustin," Mike scolded him.

"I AM being serious," Dustin insisted. "Listen, did you have a normal childhood?"

Mike shrugged his shoulders, suddenly looking off toward an empty space on the wall.

"We stayed after school for AV club," Dustin lectured. "When the other kids were playing football or baseball or whatever, and then we went over to your house to play D&D in your basement. Did we turn out so bad?"

Again, Mike shrugged, still not meeting Dustin's eyes.

"And then our friend got kidnapped by a monster and El," Dustin pointed with his chin toward the couch where she sat "saved our lives with her superpowers. It was great. I wouldn't trade it for anything. What's so great about a normal life?" Dustin curled his fingers in the

air in mock quotation when he said "normal."

"I don't know," Mike said, now staring darkly at the floor. "I just want Allie to grow up nor... Happy. I don't want her to feel different from everyone else. I want her to have friends. I want her to be... to not be like an outsider or anything."

"I think she'll be just fine," Dustin said. "Just look at us. We turned out OK. Besides, I think she'll be pretty happy with herself and have lots of friends if she saves some kids from a monster. Or from government agents. With her superpowers."

Mike scowled at him.

Dustin raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Stop that," Mike said, trying to sound more annoyed than he was.

"So she has pyrokinesis?" Dustin asked, that kiddish grin threatening to split his face in two again.

"What?" Mike asked.

"That's the official term," Dustin explained. "It's what you'd call someone who can control fire with their mind. Does she have any other powers?"

"No. At least, I don't think so," Mike said. Realizing that he didn't have the energy to resist anymore, he gave in to Dustin's enthusiasm. "Yeah, I guess she has pyrokinesis." Saying the words out loud, about his own tiny, innocent, baby girl, felt very weird.

"When did her powers first manifest?" Dustin asked, as matter-of-fact as if he were asking when a car's check-engine light had come on.

"When she was really young," Mike told him. "Almost right away. If she got sick, or sometimes just if she was upset and crying, or even if she had a bad dream, I think. She'd start tiny little fires, nothing big. It was scary, though. Really scary. Her bed sheets, her teddy bear, her favorite blanket... We had to watch her constantly. That's why El stayed home with her. We never knew if we'd turn around and find her whole crib going up in flames. We hardly got any sleep. Taking

her to the doctor was nerve wracking, cause that's when she was most likely to start a fire. I don't know how we would have explained it if she'd ever started a fire in a hospital. That would have been really hard to hide. It was... rough. We had fire extinguishers in every room, we couldn't ever turn our backs, even for a second."

"You probably didn't need to worry about the baby," Dustin said, thoughtfully stroking his chin. "Your house, sure. But not the baby. Pyroketes can't be burned by their own flames."

"Oh, you're making that up!" Mike said. "How would you even know that?"

"It just makes sense," Dustin said, holding his hands up, palms out.

"Anyway, it got a lot better after a while," Mike continued. "It happened less and less as she got older. And El really knows how to keep her calm and happy. They have a connection, like more than a regular mom would."

Dustin nodded, as if that made perfect sense to him, too.

"After the first few months, we really started to relax," Mike said. "And she hasn't had a... she hasn't started a fire in long time, not for months. Until last night."

"What do you think happened?" Dustin asked.

"No idea," Mike said. "It wasn't like any of the other times. Those were little fires. This time... this time the whole house went up in a few minutes. We barely made it out. I've never seen anything like it, ever."

"I wonder what caused it." Dustin's hand had again gone to his chin, and he was staring up at the ceiling, his eyes lost in thought. "It could be chemical changes in the brain as a natural part of her growth. It could be some outside stimulus that triggered a reaction."

"I have no idea," Mike said. "And neither do you, so stop guessing. It's not like this kind of thing happens all the time, or ever."

"I don't know," Dustin said. "I've read a couple of things."

"No, you haven't," Mike replied. "This isn't a comic book. There aren't superheroes with superpowers running around. El is one of a kind. And Allie is... she's special. Unique."

"Dark Phoenix," Dustin protested. "The Human Torch."

"Stop," Mike said, rolling his eyes. "This is different. This is real."

"You really need to get back in touch with your inner child," Dustin told him. "Ever since you went off to college, you've gotten pretty stiff."

Mike folded his arms defensively. "I'm just more practical now, that's all."

"You're stiff," Dustin insisted. "And a little self absorbed, and a little boring. I hate to say it, but you need to hear it. Maybe you need to run a D&D campaign again. You know, remember your roots. Do you still run a campaign for those kids in your class?"

"Not since the baby," Mike said. "I've been busy."

"You see?" Dustin waved his hands as if playing to a jury. "You've got your perspective all warped, somehow. El has superpowers, and that's AMAZING. You're baby is going to be amazing. You should be happy. You shouldn't be pretending it isn't real."

Mike kept his face impassive as he stared off toward empty space. Maybe...

"So, we're gonna need some fire extinguishers, aren't we?" Dustin asked, breaking Mike's dark silence.

"A lot of fire extinguishers," Mike agreed, happy to have the focus off of him and his stiffness again. "Maybe ten. Or twenty, I don't know. Two for every room in the house, or something."

"I'm on it," Dustin said happily. "You stay here with the baby. I'll drive over to Donald's General Store- Wait, no, I'll go to the Kmart in Cartersville. They'll have more in stock. Uhh..." Dustin suddenly looked a little sheepish. "I'll need you to spot me a couple of bucks. Those things aren't cheap."

Mike gladly took out his wallet and handed Dustin a credit card. "Thanks for doing this," Mike said. "And thanks for... for letting us stay here. It's kind of a big risk you're taking."

Dustin shrugged without a second thought and practically bounced out of the dark kitchen, full of eager purpose. "Bye El," Dustin waved as he crossed the living room. "I'm going to Kmart for some things. Want me to bring you back a slushie?"

She turned her head to stare over her shoulder at him. After a long and unreadable moment, she nodded her head emphatically.

"Cool, I'll be back," Dustin said, and slipped out the front door.

Mike crossed the room slowly and sank onto the couch next to El. He felt like the Earth's gravity had doubled or tripled since the fire, since his sense of normalcy and security had been derailed. He should have felt better, now that Dustin knew the truth and knew what kind of danger he was in. But, somehow, saying all those words out loud had only made them more real for Mike, and more frightening.

He swept his eyes around Dustin's living room and tried not to imagine the walls dancing with bright orange flames. Blinking hard to clear the unwanted vision, he reached over and gently grasped the baby's hand. El was holding Allie in one arm and had a book in her other hand. She was whispering and humming and talking to the baby in that weird half-verbal language that only she and the baby could understand. Little Allie looked over at him, as calm and docile as she'd ever been. There was absolutely no visible hint of what she had inside of her. Mike tried very hard not to think of her as a stick of dynamite. Was it possible to love a stick of dynamite with all your heart, he wondered?

Yes. Yes it was.

Without warning, in her uniquely abrupt manner, El reached over the baby and thrust the book she'd been reading toward Mike. He glanced down at the cover: The Call of Cthulhu and other Strange Tales.

"What does Cthulhu want with humans?" El asked him matter-of-

factly. "And why does he call to them?"

Mike's eyebrows knitted together. "Where did you find THAT book?"

El inclined her head toward Dustin's book shelf.

"Oh," Mike said. "Well, it's kind of hard to explain..."

Hopper sat next to Sam in his truck in the parking lot of a Burger King, working on his fries as they listened to the every-day chatter the police radio. Sam had been buying Hopper food whenever possible, it seemed, in some small token of thanks for coming all the way out there.

"They have these back in Hawkins?" Sam asked, patting the police radio with the hand that didn't hold his half eaten burger.

Hopper glanced down at it. "An older model," he said defensively.

"You should see the inside of the squad cars we have over here," Sam said proudly. "Full of toys."

"You're missing the big picture," Hopper told him. "Why would Hawkins PD buy the newest radios just to talk to the three other officers on duty?"

Sam shook his head with an amused smile.

"Listen, one time I picked up this teenager, Troy was his name," Hopper recounted. "He'd been driving around with a baseball bat taking out mailboxes."

"Sounds like a real Al Capone," Sam said.

"When I pulled him over, the kid cried," Hopper continued. "Actually broke down and cried. Begged me not to tell his parents. That's the kind of hardened criminals we deal with in Hawkins. You understand why a guy might want to live there?"

Sam snorted. "What do you guys do for fun?"

"Knitting and sewing, mostly," Hopper said, keeping a straight face. "You know, bonnets, zipperless pants, horse blankets..." He glanced over at Sam, who had choked on his burger and had started to cough. "We even have a movie theater we made out of tree bark and animal hides."

When Sam had recovered and swallowed the bite of burger, he asked "How old are the squad cars over there?"

"Well when I was Chief they were all 75s," Hopper told him. "The guy I left in charge when I retired, name's Powell, wanted to organize a millage to buy all new ones. But that year the state inspectors threatened to shut down the city water treatment plant because they weren't chlorinating or something like that, so the money had to go there. In the end, Powell bought some newer used squad cars from Cartersville PD."

"What a paradise," Sam said. "I always wondered-" He shut his mouth as something on the police radio caught his ear.

A fire. The dispatcher was calling out all the fire trucks at once.

Hopper and Sam's eyes met for a single beat before Sam sprang into frenzied motion. Tossing the last of his burger out the window, he threw the truck into gear and peeled out, his tires spraying gravel.

Without regard for the traffic lights, Sam made great time getting them there. Hopper was briefly able to admire the really upscale neighborhood as Sam took some of the corners almost on two wheels. They had beaten most of the first responders to the site. Only a few fire trucks, and no police, were there ahead of them.

The house, the three-quarter-million dollar house, Hopper guessed, was blazing like a furnace when they pulled up. Sam threw the truck in park and jumped out, leaving it still running. The fire fighters had only just begun to hose it down, but there was no hope of saving the place. Even from across the street Hopper wanted to recoil from the oppressive heat. Sam was moving around toward the side of the house in a wide circle, and Hopper tore his eyes away from the enchanting flames, which he realized had grown even higher in the few seconds he'd been standing and staring, and followed after his

friend.

Sam broke into a jog as he came around where he could see the side of the house. Tightening his circle, he started to move faster. Hopper thought about telling him to slow down and wait for the other cops to arrive, but he knew the other wouldn't listen.

"Hey!" Sam shouted. He was further around the perimeter than Hopper, who guessed he could probably see the back door of the house by then.

"Hey! Police! Stop!" Sam gave chase, sprinting as fast as he could. For about the first eight seconds, Hopper was right on his heels. Then his body remembered that he wasn't 40 anymore, and he started to fall behind. He could see Sam's quarry now, a man up ahead wearing dark clothes, running for all he was worth. After a few more seconds, the other two drew even farther ahead. Hopper slowed to a jog, and then a full stop. It was clear to him that Sam had kept his lungs, or maybe all of him, in better shape in recent years.

"You keep on him, I'll bring the truck," Hopper called out, doubting that Sam would even hear him. He doubled back and jumped in Sam's truck, which was still running. He had time to notice that the burning house had turned into something out of a Godzilla movie with flames reaching twice as high as the tallest trees in the cul-de-sac. That was weird, but it wasn't his priority.

The truck bounced a little as he drove over a few garden gnomes on his way across the lawn. He cut over onto the next street in the direction Sam and the suspect had been running. He had no way to know which side street they might have turned down, so he slowed at each intersection, swinging his head left and right.

They turned out to be easy to find. Bright orange flames caught Hopper's eye, and her jerked the steering wheel around and burned rubber down the little 25 mile-an-hour road to catch up.

He'd barely had time to get up to speed when his eyes fully took in the situation and he had to slam on the brakes before plowing through a literal wall of fire.

The wall stretched left to right across the road and across the lawns on either side, completely cutting off any pursuit. Sam paced back and forth like an angry panther unable to chase his prey. Hopper put the truck in park and jumped out, marveling at the bright orange, dancing barrier. Somehow the fire was holding its shape, perfectly straight, twice as tall as a chain link fence, neither dying down nor spreading.

What is it burning? He wondered, looking at the part of the fire-wall that sat atop plain asphalt.

"You see?" Sam shouted, not looking at Hopper, craning his neck as if he'd be able to see over the fire-wall and catch a glimpse of the fleeing arsonist.

"Do you see it?"

"I see it," Hopper said in a level voice, still fascinated by the fire that didn't behave like fire.

"I'm not crazy," Sam declared to the open air. "I'm not crazy!"

"You're not crazy," Hopper agreed, in a much calmer tone than the other. "Come on, we might be able to circle around and cut him off a couple streets down."

Wordlessly, his face a wild mask of emotions, Sam got behind the wheel and backed his truck down to the first cross street and headed off. They searched for more than twenty minutes down every road in the development with no luck. Sam didn't respond to any of Hopper's questions, his eyes locked ahead with an expression that might have fit a hunting dog. Finally, when his adrenaline had died down and he admitted to himself that they weren't going to pick up the trail, Sam pulled onto the side of the road, put the truck in park, and slumped back against the head rest.

"Did you get a look at his face?" Hopper asked.

"No," Sam said in frustration. "He was about 5 foot 8, medium build, tan skin, dark hair. That's all I got. You saw him, though, right?"

"I saw him," Hopper agreed.

"And you saw the..." Sam waved his hand, lost for words.

"I saw the fire, yeah," Hopper said.

"I'm not crazy," Sam repeated.

"Never thought you were," Hopper told him.

"I've got to make the Chief believe me," Sam said, to the steering wheel as well as to Hopper. "We need to get the whole force on this guy. He could have at least a dozen counts of murder on his hands now."

"You so sure he's a murderer?" Hopper asked, frowning.

"Hop, that's wasn't just a random house back there," Sam said, turning away from the steering wheel to face him. "It belongs to one of the major crime bosses in this whole area. First a drug warehouse, now this. We could have some kind of cartel war going on."

"So you think this guy, who makes fires with his hands, works for drug dealers?" Hopper said rhetorically.

"Whoever he is, he's already killed enough people to get the chair. If we don't catch him, he'll kill again."

"Maybe," Hopper said in a quieter tone.

"Maybe?"

"Well, he let you live, didn't he?" Hopper asked. "What was that wall of fire back there? It seems to me the guy could have just roasted you and gotten away clean."

Sam turned back to scowl at the steering wheel and didn't answer. Hopper let the silence linger for a long time before he said what he was thinking.

"Sam, I'm gonna tell you something. You're a big city cop, and there's one big problem with that. You only ever get to see the worst in people, day after day after day. I remember how it was. You see murders and rapes and abused wives and drug dealers. You see this

little slice of the world, the worst of the worst, and it makes you cold and dead. You forget that most people are basically good."

Still not looking over, Sam took a deep and slow breath. Hopper went on.

"I treated people like trash for years," he said quietly. "I made people hate me. I wanted people to hate me. Cause I couldn't handle losing my little girl. I didn't know how to deal with it, so I acted like an ass to everyone. Doesn't make it right... But maybe this guy, our arsonist, maybe he does what he does for a reason."

"Your heart bleeds for people now?" Sam asked darkly. "Everybody's got a story, is that it?"

Hopper took the jab without comment.

"Maybe he's a little more complicated than we know," Hopper said. "Like I said, maybe there's a reason he does what he does."

Sam shifted a little uncomfortably in his seat, so Hopper decided to let it rest for the time being.

"You want to use me as an eye witness when you talk to the chief?" Hopper offered. "I'll help corroborate your story."

"The chief wouldn't be happy that I brought an outsider into this," Sam said regretfully.

"Then I won't tell him you did," Hopper said. "I'm not bad at talking my way out of things. I'll just tell him I happened to be in town... to catch a game. I came to see the... to see the ah... Who's your NFL team again?"

"We don't have one," Sam said, rolling his eyes as he put the truck back in gear and pulled back onto the road. Hopper hid his evil grin from the other.

"At least Hawkins has the Tigers," Hopper said proudly. "They tore up the Cartersville Cavaliers last week.

Sam smiled, at last, and shook his head.

"Can you stop at a pay phone before we get to the station? I need to call Joyce and let her know that I won't be back as soon as I'd planned on."

3. Chapter 3

Firebaby

Chapter 3

Trees and power lines rolled by as Dustin cruised down Kerley road on his way home from Donald's General Store. Joyce Byers still worked there, and he always took the time to catch up with an old family friend, but she hadn't been in today. He wondered how much he would have told her about the recent excitement in his life. Mike and El, certainly. She'd be happy to hear that they were safe after their house fire, which probably everyone in Hawkins had heard about. A whole house going up in flames was the kind of news that went around town quick. But baby Allie and her superpowers... Dustin probably wouldn't have mentioned that part to Joyce. That wasn't his secret to tell.

The trees on the side of the road cleared, giving way to an open field, giving Dustin a clear line of sight all the way down to the street corner where he'd turn toward his house. Driving on autopilot down a road that he'd covered literally thousands of times in his life, whether in a car or on a bike, something grabbed at his subconscious and jerked him violently awake.

There was a white van parked on the side of the road up ahead. A tiny feeling in the pit of Dustin's stomach drew his curiosity. He wasn't a paranoid man. In fact, Dustin considered himself to be fairly trusting and easygoing. But he had learned over his life never to close a door when his curiosity was piqued. Or his suspicion.

He slowed down to get a better look. A man in blue coveralls was kneeling at the base of a power line pole, half concealed behind the parked van. Dustin drew up next to him and rolled down his window.

"Hey man, how's it going?" He asked very awkardly.

The man, holding a piece of power cable in one hand and a pair of wire cutters in the other, barely glanced up in response.

"Mornin," the man in blue said.

"So you work for..." Dustin glanced back at the Van with the big blue logo on the side. "AT&T? You know I live just down the road and my internet's been really slow lately."

"That right?" The supposed workman said, this time not even looking up from his work.

"Yeah, glacially slow," Dustin said, trying his absolute best to sound conversational. "Uh..." he squinted at the name tag sewn onto the man's coveralls. "...John." Such a common name, Dustin thought. Such an easy name to fake.

"Well you'd have to call them," John, if that was his real name, said, pointing over his shoulder toward the logo on the van. "I just fix work orders when they give 'em to me."

"Right," Dustin said quickly. "I will." He searched around for another thread. "You know, I used to work for The Phone Company, right after I got out of school."

The so called John still didn't look up from his work, and took so long to answer, it was clear he was hoping Dustin would just go away and leave him alone. "Oh yeah?" he said, after forever.

"Yeah," Dustin said, jumping at an idea that had just come to him. "It wasn't a bad job. Do they still pay mileage when you have to come way out here?"

Finally the repair man paused what he was doing and lifted his face to Dustin. "Buddy, they haven't paid mileage in a couple of years. It's a crime. They expect me to come all the way to nowhere Indiana, no offense. It takes twice as long, but I get paid the same. They just don't care."

"Don't I know it," Dustin said, shaking his head in empathy. "My buddy Tim still works there. He says he wishes he'd gotten out when I did."

"What can ya do?" John said, shrugging his big shoulders.

"Hey, if you're the tech they send down to fix my internet, I'll buy you a pizza for your trouble," Dustin said.

John chuckled, "I'll take it, thanks."

"Well listen, don't work too hard," Dustin said, lightly slapping his steering wheel to break the moment. "I know The Company can be slave drivers."

"I'll try," John said cheerily, and waved his wire cutters as good bye. Dustin pulled away and continued on down Kerley, his suspicions well and fully put to rest. He hadn't actually ever worked for AT&T, but a friend of his had, and Dustin knew the company had stopped paying its repair tech mileage two years ago. Confident that John from AT&T really was John from AT&T and not Agent Jones from the NSA, and more than a little proud of his sleuthing work, Dustin continued on home with his haul from the general store. He had food for the baby, extra paper plates, since he had house guests and didn't like doing dishes, and a few candy bars for himself and for El. He'd gotten some candy bars to offer to Mike, too, but he didn't eat nearly as much candy, so Dustin would be happy to eat Mike's share.

El pushed open the screen door that led into Dustin's back yard. The springs creaked and rasped with age. One of the hinges was half broken off, too, so she had to lift as she pushed to keep the door from falling out of the frame. Clearly Dustin wasted little time on do-it-yourself home repair.

The afternoon sun was shining down on the mildly overgrown grass and weeds of Dustin's back yard. He owned a couple of rickety lawn chairs, and El dragged one over into the shade of a tree. Mike pulled a second a chair over and sat on the side where she was holding Allie. He gazed at the baby, concern obvious on his face. El didn't even need her extra senses to feel the concern flowing out of him.

"She's fine right now," El reassured him.

"Really," Mike asked. "No chance of a... a fire?"

El thought for a minute. "Not much," she told him.

"What happened?" Mike asked.

Again El considered her answer, looking down at Allie as she though. "Nightmare," she told him. "About fire."

"But why now?" He asked. "It's been years since that happened to her."

El wished she had an easy answer. She'd experienced a very brief flash of Allie's nightmare, but only a flash. For that one second before their whole living room had gone up in flames, she'd been able to feel the baby's fear, sudden and alien, seemingly out of nowhere. She couldn't explain where it had come from. Her intuition gave her only a few hints. While she gazed down at the baby, he eyes going a little out of focus, she was distracted by a quiet buzzing sound. She glanced up to see a bee flitting around over head.

"What are the chances it'll happen again?" Mike asked.

The bee flew a little too close to his face, and Mike flinched.

"It's worse if she's asleep," El told him. "Or upset." A second bee zipped by her own face. El gave the air around her a gentle push, and the bee zipped away as if blown by a stiff breeze. "I can keep her calm," she told him. It only took a little effort to touch Allie's mind and send her reassuring feelings of happiness and safety, not nearly enough to drain El. She could keep it up all day if she needed to.

Another bee buzzed Mike's head, and he swatted it away.

"No idea what caused it?" Mike asked. El frowned, wishing she knew. She heard another bee swooping from above, and she formed a thin little barrier in the air over her head. The bee bounced into the invisible wall nose first, then turned around and buzzed off.

"I guess it could have been a random thing," Mike thought out loud. "Or at least a one-time thing. Maybe we don't need to worry about it again." He was hoping to convince himself. She knew Mike to be a worrier. As long as there was anything wrong with the baby, Mike would pull his hair out and grind his teeth in his sleep until the danger was passed. That first time Allie had gotten an ear infection

had been really rough on him. El wished she could send him calming thoughts as easily as she could the baby, but it wasn't so simple. Allie was half El, after all, and also shared El's receptivity. Instead, she put a hand on Mike's, hoping it would help almost as much.

Another bee tried to land on Mike, and he flapped his arm to keep it off.

"Maybe we should go back inside," he suggested.

El took her attention off the baby for a minute and looked around. There were indeed several bees, maybe a dozen, flitting around their lawn chairs. She cast her eyes up to the tree they were using as shade. There were more bees up there and, as expected, a big paper nest hanging from one of the higher branches. El pointed up at it.

"Oh," Mike said in alarm, swatting at another bee. "Yeah, why don't we go back in?"

Narrowing her eyes a little at the paper nest, El tugged at it gently. The thing shifted, disturbing a couple more bees, but only a couple. She hoped the bees were used to their nest being jostled by the wind a little bit. She tugged again.

"Uhh..." Mike said nervously.

As carefully as she could, El pulled one more time, and the little stem holding the nest to the tree tore free. A few more bees buzzed around in alarm, but the nest had only moved a couple of inches, so they didn't get too upset. Slowly, slowly, she made the nest drift through the air away from their tree and out into the open air. The bees followed their nest as it floated like a lazy balloon. The few that still remained buzzing around her and Mike now took off, alerted by their hive mates that their home was on the move.

She'd never even seen a bee until she was about twelve years old, though she'd seen drawings of them in some of the little children's picture books Brenner had given her when she was young. The first time she'd ever been stung had been in Mike's front yard a few months after the whole ordeal surrounding Hawkins Lab had finally ended. Once she knew what they were and what they did and that

she shouldn't ever poke one, El had thought very little about bees, until some time later when Ted had introduced her to honey on her eggos. Then she'd been fascinated by the little things.

She still didn't want one to sting Allie. That might have been disastrous. Wrinkling her forehead in concentration, El set the paper nest down, very gently, in another tree much farther away. She settled back in her lawn chair to relax. Allie made quiet but content sounds in her arms.

"I'm sure it'll get easier for her when she gets older," Mike offered, partly to himself. "Just like crying, or diapers. Kids outgrow things."

El considered that. It was possible. She had no past experience to draw on. She'd never known anyone like her, anyone who shared her condition. As a child, she'd sometimes wondered if there were other kids like her in other rooms of other wings of Hawkins Lab. When she looked back on it now, though, she was pretty sure she would have been able to feel if there had been others there. As far as she knew, she'd been the only one in the Lab with abilities, and the only child in the lab, besides. She'd never even seen another child until she'd run into Mike, Dustin, and Lucas completely by chance. Before that, nearly every other human she'd ever laid eyes on had been 6 feet tall, gravely serious, and under the authority of Brenner. A tiny smile curled her lip as she realized how bizarre it all was, in retrospect.

Over on the front side of the house, they heard a car slow down and pull into the driveway, and El was aware it was Dustin.

"I'll see if he needs help carrying things in from the car," Mike said, getting up out of the lawn chair. He left the shade of their tree and turned back toward the house. Dustin beat him to it, coming through the back screen door with a loud scrape as he didn't take the time to lift on the broken hinge while he pushed it open.

"Oh, there you guys are. I'm back with the stuff," he said. "He, you guys shouldn't sit too close to that tree. There are bees."

"El took care of it," Mike told him.

"Oh," Dustin said, coming closer and craning his neck up to search

the tree's upper branches. "Thanks El. I got a ladder and tried to get the nest down with a broom one day. It was horrible. I put on two jackets and gloves and a mask, but one of the bees got inside the mask, and then I fell off the ladder. I didn't break anything. Anyway, whose hungry?"

The pizza was nearly gone, with what remained of it sitting in the open box on Dustin's coffee table. Mike had half of a slice in one hand, nearly forgotten as he gazed with only partial interest at the living room TV, which had started showing the evening news. On the couch next to him, El had her own half-eaten piece of pizza on a paper plate on her lap, baby Allie held, as ever, in one arm. In the last place on the couch, Dustin was collecting up the wrappers to his Reese's Peanut Butter Cups and El's Milky Way Dark.

"A car crash on I-69 today claimed two lives," the news woman was saying, though Mike wasn't really listening. Anything outside of his bubble, right now, was low priority.

"Dustin," El said, turning her attention away from the TV to look over at him. She reached under the coffee table and handed him his book: Star Wars: Heir to the Empire. "Why isn't Leia a Jedi yet?"

"You finished it already?" Dustin asked in surprise. Taking back the book that he'd given her the day before, he bounced it absentmindedly in his hands.

"It looks like thunderstorms all day tomorrow in Fort Wayne," the weatherman was saying on the TV. Mike listened with only half an ear as El continued to stare at Dustin intently, awaiting an answer.

"Her brother is a Jedi," El pressed. "Why isn't Leia?"

"I guess she's too busy with the new government and stuff?" Dustin said, glancing down at the book for inspiration. "And then she's got her new family that takes up a lot of her time..."

El's eyes briefly flicked to Allie.

"She just doesn't have time to train to be a Jedi, I guess," Dustin said.

El raised an eyebrow.

"They aren't like you, El," Dustin told her. "You were born with your powers. I mean, I guess they were, too, but it's not the same. Luke never knew he could use the Force until he was, like, 18 years old. And he didn't tell Leia that she had the Force, too, until the last movie. It's like kung fu. You have to train to be a Jedi."

El seemed to consider that for a long moment.

"And in other news," the anchor said, as Mike distractedly took another bite of his pizza. "The latest in a string of fires in Sacramento California, responsible for a number of deaths. Steve Curtis, on location with the fire fighters-"

Mike was violently jerked out of his stupor as El nearly leaped off the couch. Before his mind had time to catch up she had crossed the room, with the baby still in one arm, and was kneeling in front of the TV, her face pressed nearly up against the glass.

"El?" Mike called out in alarm, echoed a split second later by Dustin. "What is it?" He asked, moving closer to the TV himself. She didn't answer. She only continued to stare.

Hopper took out a cigarette, decided he didn't need it, and put in back in his pocket. He gently drummed his fingers on the open window frame of Sam's truck as he eyed the police station across the street. Somewhere inside, Same was pleading his case to the chief, and Hopper didn't envy him. It wasn't easy being the only person who knew a thing. It wasn't easy when everyone around you who you were supposed to know and trust suddenly started telling you that you'd lost your mind.

The police station's door flew open, interrupting Hopper thoughts, and Sam burst out and stalked across the street to his truck. He climbed in behind the wheel and slammed the door. Hopper wordlessly offered him the same cigarette, which he took.

"Chief didn't want to hear a word of it," Sam growled.

Hopper offered him a lighter.

"Then he wanted to know why I was poking around a crime scene when I was supposed to be off duty," Sam went on. He cranked the key in the ignition as if he was twisting the cheif's collar around his neck. "Maybe I should have dropped it right there, but I couldn't. So we had a few more words, and now he put me on medical leave. I'm out of commission until the chief thinks my head's back on straight."

Hopper's shoulders sagged a little, sympathetically.

"I need a drink," Sam said, pulling out of the parking space.

"Just one," Hopper reminded him.

Sam didn't say much else until they sat down at his favorite grill-and-bar and had been served their drinks. Hopper had been allowing him to work through his thoughts in silence. After his first swigs, Sam said "Sorry I dragged you into this. You could be at home fishing right now."

Hopper shook his head. "The fish'll be there when I get back. But now, I think maybe you should take a few days off, for real this time, actually get some rest."

"I'm not letting this go," Sam said, scowling down at his beer.

"Maybe just don't kill yourself while you do it," Hopper offered. "This arsonist is real, so sooner or later other people will see him, and eventually everyone will know you were right this whole time."

Sam finally looked up from his drink and looked at, really inspected, Hopper's face. "I used to be the reasonable one, Hop." Sam's eyes dropped back down to his hands again and he gave a self conscious chuckle. "Now look at me."

"You're allowed to be unreasonable sometimes. I sank pretty far before I swam back up," Hopper told him. "I wasn't reasonable for a long time."

To Hopper's surprise, Sam only seemed to sag further. He hung his head and seemed unable to meet Hopper's eyes.

"Sorry I wasn't there," Sam told him, so quiet Hopper could barely hear over the other people talking around the bar. "When you and Diane lost Sara, I should have been there for you guys."

Hopper took a sip of his drink. "It's not your fault," he said. "I was pushing everyone away then. You, Frank, the other guys from the station, even Diane. I was crawling down into a little hole. I wanted to die down in there alone, and I didn't want anyone in there with me. You weren't there because I chased you away, and everyone else. That's on me."

"It must have been hell," Sam mumbled.

"It was, but I made it worse." Hopper said. "I didn't have to be alone. Look how many people I could have hand around me, holding me up. But I didn't want that, cause I wanted to make it worse. I wanted to drown. I didn't have to quit the force. I didn't have to lose Diane. I'm the one who did that. Sometimes bad things happen that you can't control, but I didn't have to lay down and live in it for years like I did."

Sam lifted his head again and gave Hopper a puzzled look. "You must have had something really good happen to you."

"I had a few things, yeah," Hopper admitted.

"What's she like?" Sam asked.

Hopper laughed. "Maybe you'll get to meet her when we're all done with this."

"When WE'RE all done?" Sam asked.

"Yeah," Hopper told him. "I can see you're stupid enough to keep chasing this, and I'm not gonna let you get into trouble without some backup."

Sam tried to hide his smile by looking down again. "Thanks," he choked out, then took another drink to cover the moment. Hopper offered him another cigarette.

"Would you believe I'd quit smoking before this whole fire thing

started?" Sam asked. "Cold turkey, six months ago."

"Well, if you did it once, you can do it again," Hopper said. He let Sam smoke and think in silence for a full minute. After pressing the butt into an ash tray, Sam made a show of looking all around the bar.

"Alright, Hop, we're here, there's no one paying attention. I have to know," Sam said. "What happened in Hawkins that you can't talk about? What was the big conspiracy?"

Hopper lifted his drink to his mouth, but only to provide cover while he considered what to say.

"How do you know about that, anyway?" He asked, honestly curious.

"You're the one who turned me on to something," Sam told him. "Frank and I get a call from you, out of the blue. Haven't heard from you in years, but there you are, asking for an address for a Terry Ives. Then you're off the phone. No explanation, no time to catch up. Then I start seeing things in the papers. A bunch of dead bodies at a school in Hawkins. A kid showed up alive after they had a funeral for him, in Hawkins. Hawkins national lab gets shut down. I didn't even know Hawkins was big enough to have a national lab. I don't think Hawkins has been in the papers so much since that one time Richard Nixon visited there on campaign and broke his toe."

"So I started asking some of my friends at State if they knew anything," Sam went on. "A guy I know, don't think you ever met him, name's Mike Klein, told me his partner, a guy named O'Bannon, up and disappeared. Retired from the force and moved out of Indiana, all because of something weird that happened in Hawkins. So you see how it looks from my angle."

Hopper rubbed his chin and grimaced. "There's not that much to tell," he said, wondering how much he wanted to give up. "A kid went missing, we thought he was dead, until I stumbled on a big cover up. They weren't playing games back then. They were bugging people's houses, staging suicides... It wasn't a fun time. Then the lab got shut down, and nobody was supposed to talk about it ever again. That was years ago, and nothing's changed."

"But it wasn't just suits from the NSA, right?" Sam pressed.

"Why? What have you heard?" Hopper asked.

"Just some crazy things," Sam mumbled.

"Crazy like a guy who moves fire with his hands?" Hopper asked.

"I guess so," Sam allowed.

"Well there was some crazy stuff," Hopper told him. "Stuff they don't teach you about in school, or even Sunday school. But it's over now, so I try not to worry about it." His eyes glazed over for a moment as he remembered a huge, gaping maw, breathing and rumbling, like the belly of a leviathan. He remembered the place that was like Hawkins but cold and dark and dead and empty, except for a kid, a kid who'd gotten trapped there and almost died. Hopper shuddered a little at the memory. He couldn't say it had all been bad, though. If it hadn't been for that single night where he'd been handcuffed and tazed by agents from the lab, and then allowed to put on a hazmat suit and climb through the maw, he'd never have met Will. He'd never have been given the gift of being something close to a father again. He'd never have gotten to watch the kid grow up and move out of the house. Though he'd never admit it to the guys, his eyes had actually misted up on the day Will moved out for college. Sometimes Joyce still teased him about it.

Then Hopper's face darkened. "There was a monster, too," he said, as if he's told Sam, out loud, all those other things. He realized the slip he'd made, but decided he didn't need to hide it from Sam. "That's what killed all those people at the school. And a few guys out deer hunting, and a girl who happened to be out late one night. It wasn't anything born on this earth. I don't know what it was or where it came from. And there was a girl. She could do things with her mind."

Sam swore softly. "What else do you think is out there?" He waved a hand encompassing... the world.

"I try not to think about it," Hopper said. "Stuff like that isn't very forgiving. When us normal humans run into it, it ends badly."

"So what in the world were they doing down in that lab?" Sam asked, looking alarmed.

"Playing with things they shouldn't have," Hopper said.

"And do you think that means our arsonist came from a lab?" Sam asked.

Hopper thought about that, but he really had no answer.

In a small house in Los Angeles, a woman lay asleep in her bed. Next to her bed stood a monster. There may have been other monsters in the world, but this one, both because of who he was and what he did, was truly a monster. He'd been a man once. He'd even had a human name, though he didn't use it anymore. He'd once had family and people he called friends, but none of them would have recognized him as he was now. He had simply changed too much, both in body and in spirit.

He stared down at the sleeping woman. She had a human name, too, and friends and family. She wasn't a monster, like he was, but she was special. Though she looked perfectly unremarkable on the outside, she could do something that normal people couldn't. She could move things with only a thought.

He knew she had telekinetic abilities. He had seen it in his dreams, just as he had known where to find her from his dreams. His dreams told him quite a lot, and they'd never yet been wrong. He had spent some time deciding what to do about her, but in the end, the decision was easy. Her powers were weak. At most, she could close a door from across the room, or lift her car keys off a table. Anything bigger than that was beyond her limits.

That didn't mean she was entirely harmless, though. She might have a child one day, who might have no special talents at all. But her child might just as easily have the same talents as her, only more powerful. Or maybe someone would discover what she could do and put her in a lab to be studied, and one day figure out how to replicate or increase her powers. There were many possibilities, if she remained a loose end. The monster didn't want that. He wanted to be

the only one, or at least, the only one who mattered.

He could influence her mind and make her leave with him, but she was simply of no use to him, and would only slow him down. He extended a hand toward her sleeping form. Unaware of his presence, she slept on. With his hand still outstretched in the air, the monster clenched it into a fist. With a barely audible crunch, he crushed her neck. It was easy for him. His power was not so limited as hers.

"Mike, tell me that you've seen Jurassic Park," Dustin said as he pushed their shopping cart through the sliding glass Kmart doors.

"I didn't have time," Mike said.

"It's the best thing ever," Dustin told him. "Spielberg really outdid himself this time. I mean, I'm not saying it's better than Raiders of the Lost Ark or Back to the Future, but it's pretty awesome. The things they can do with animatronics these days... El," he turned to her. "You HAVE to make sure Mike gets it when it comes out." He paused to take a quarter out of his pocket and put it into the gumball machine next to the layaway counter. "You guys want one? Anyway, we should make sure to hit the toy section before we leave. You'll want to see the big T-Rex they have. It looks exactly like the one in the movie, and it's ten times as big as Rory the Dinosaur. Whatever you do, though," Dustin segued into another thought. "Don't watch Super Mario Brothers. That movie's a disgrace to the game and everyone who played it."

They visited the baby section first to get more diapers and maybe a stuffed animal. Dustin was looking at a rubber duck on the shelf and considering offering it to Allie when something else caught his eye. He put down the rubber duck and quickly made an excuse to Mike and El. "Just a second, guys," Dustin said. "I'll be right back. I have to go to the bathroom." He ducked out of the aisle and tried to stroll as casually as he could while he searched for the object of his suspicion. He found the man in question three aisles over, standing and examining a 30 inch TV that was on sale. Dustin came around the corner with his hands in his pockets and ambled slowly down the aisle.

The first thing that caught his attention was the man's three piece suit. How many of those had he ever seen shopping at Kmart? The next thing he noticed was the military hair cut, and lastly, that his shopping cart was empty. Dustin looked him up and down as he slowly approached from behind, looking for any further clues about the mystery man's identity.

The man put down the TV he'd been looking at and turned around. Dustin spun like a top and grabbed the first product off the shelf that his hand landed on. It turned out to be a lava lamp, and he pretended to study it in great detail. The mystery man didn't seem to have noticed that he was being watched. Not yet, anyway. Dustin realized his good fortune at having grabbed a lava lamp, because he found himself able to look through it while pretending to look at it. He did just that, continuing to spy on the man in the suit, slightly distorted through the lamp's curved glass. The man had now moved on to look at a four piece stereo boxed set. He appeared to be acting completely natural, as if he really was just shopping for a TV and a stereo. But then, Dustin thought, he WOULD act natural if he was an agent highly trained in the art of spycraft.

Dustin backpedaled a few steps to the end of the aisle, where he could look back down the main track. Mike and El had finished in the baby section and were now heading toward the women's clothing department. He glanced back at the mystery man, who made no move to follow them. But then, if he was well trained, he would keep his distance, and never appear too eager, wouldn't he? Dustin didn't want to turn his back on a potential threat until he was sure there was no danger. Placing the lava lamp back on the shelf and shoving his hands back in his pockets, he sidled up next to the man in the suit.

"I'd go with a Sony, if I were you," Dustin said.

"I'm sorry?" The man said, either surprised by this unexpected interruption, or pretending to be surprised.

"If you're going to buy a stereo set," Dustin clarified, "Sony is a way better brand." Did his voice sound natural? He hoped so.

"Oh, thanks," the mystery man said quickly, and turned back reading

the product features on the box.

"Yeah, I'd check out Radio Shack, though," Dustin pressed. "They always have a better selection."

Seeming to realize that Dustin wasn't going to simply go away, the mystery man slowly turned from the stereo box and looked at him.

"Yeah, maybe I'll look there," the man said.

"Hey, that's a nice suit," Dustin said, hit by a burst of inspiration. "I have this job interview coming up, and I need to get one. What brand is that?"

The mystery man put the box down and stared back at Dustin with a confused look on his face. When Dustin responded with nothing but an eagerly inquisitive and friendly expression, the man seemed to finally take him seriously.

"I ahh," the man said. "I don't remember," he opened one side of the jacket and looked at the tag inside. "Oh, it's a Corleone."

Dustin wasn't actually interested in the brand, but when the guy had opened the suit jacket to look, Dustin had been able to see that he didn't have a shoulder holster underneath. Reasonably satisfied that the customer was just a customer, he tried to make his exit as graceful as possible.

"Maybe I'll get one," Dustin said. "For my... job interview. So yeah. Remember... Radio Shack... Sony..." The man seemed all too happy to be left alone, so Dustin retreated from the aisle and backed onto the main track. Mike and El were already coming back up the track toward him.

"I'm back," Dustin said brightly. "From the... bathroom. Did you find everything?"

"They didn't have the shirt in the color she wanted," Mike said.

"Oh," Dustin said. "Well, don't forget we need to visit the toy department before we go. You still haven't seen that T-Rex." He fell into step beside them as they walked, but kept glancing back toward

the aisle where he'd talked to the man in the suit. "Hey El, you would uhh," he tried to word it as carefully as he could. "You'd know if someone was lying, right? Or hiding their identity?"

She gave him a completely unreadable look, and Dustin wondered whether he should come right out and say it or not. While he was debating with himself, the man in the suit emerged from the aisle, pushing his empty shopping cart. Upon seeing Dustin, he quickly looked away, possibly afraid that Dustin was going to bother him again. Dustin's eyes followed the man as he turned and disappeared down another aisle. He glanced back at El to realize that she'd been looking at the man, too. She continued to gaze for a half second longer, then looked back to Dustin.

"He's alright," El told him.

"Oh, good," Dustin said, feeling all of the tension drain out of his muscles. "I wasn't worried." He glanced over at Mike, who didn't seem to have noticed the little exchange. That was good, Dustin thought. He didn't want to worry Mike without a good reason. The poor guy already worried too much.

Mike slept very uneasily. He'd begun sleeping uneasily when they'd first brought Allie home from the hospital. He'd always worried about her. Even before he and El had become aware of her... gifts, he'd been a worrier. One of the nurses had told him, quite bluntly, that there were two types of parents in the world: the kind who worried about their babies every second, and the kind who didn't have nervous breakdowns.

He'd always envied that El could sleep soundly all night, while he tossed and turned and got up every twenty minutes to make sure Allie hadn't rolled over onto something that might smother her. Yet, somehow, when the baby did wake up crying in the middle of the night, El was already up, anticipating it by at least a minute. After the first few days, Mike had bags under his eyes and his already thin features had become even more drawn, while El looked positively chipper. Had it been anyone else, Mike would have been very resentful.

Tonight, Mike slept even worse than he had when Allie was only a few days old. When he did drift off, he was rewarded with some of the darkest dreams he'd ever experienced. Memories of standing at the edge of a stone quarry cliff and knowing he needed to jump, or memories of standing in his middleschool science classroom while a monster smashed through the door, kept swimming through his head. He was even plagued by memories of Allie's first incidents. The memories seemed so vivid that he could smell the smoke.

He could smell the smoke.

Then he heard a sound that his dreaming mind interpreted as the Demogorgon's roar, and Mike jumped out of the bed, yelling in alarm.

El sprayed the fire extinguisher again, which sounded a bit less like the Demogorgon now that Mike was awake. He blinked his eyes, trying to orient himself. El was standing next to him at the bedside, baby Allie in one hand, and a fire extinguisher in the other. She sprayed the baby's crib one last time. The smell of smoke still hung in the air.

"El," Mike began.

He heard a loud thump and then a crash from somewhere else in the house. A second later, Dustin burst into the room, wearing plaid pajama pants and a ninja turtles T shirt, a fire extinguisher in each hand.

"Did it happen again?" Dustin asked, his eyes wide and round.

Mike was too tense to answer.

"Woah," Dustin said, crossing the room to look into the baby's crib, which was only partially burned.

Next to Mike, El was quietly talking and humming to Allie, who seemed so much calmer than any of the adults in the room.

Hopper was jerked out of a pleasant dream about fishing when Sam slapped him on the leg. He sat up with a surprised shout and looked

around the dark living room as if ready for a fight. It took a full second to remember where he was.

"Get your boots on," Sam told him. "There's another fire."

Hopper wiped a tiny bit of drool from his chin and slowly rolled off Sam's couch. "Have you been up the whole night listening to the police scanner?" He asked.

"Yeah," Sam said without apology. "Hurry."

Grabbing his hat and stepping into his boots, Hopper followed Sam out the door. As soon as Sam turned the key in the ignition, the police radio came to life and started spitting out an intermittent stream of chatter. There was a fire, alright. Hopper glanced at his watch. It was 1:00 AM.

"Did you get any sleep? At all?" He asked Sam. The other didn't answer, but backed out of the drive way and burned rubber as soon as he hit the street.

The roads were pretty empty, considering the late hour. Not Hawkins empty, but pretty empty. That only made it easier for Sam to ignore the stop lights. Luckily, none of his fellow Sacramento PD friends seemed to be on the prowl that night. Maybe they were all on their way to the fire, too.

"Corner of 127 and Douglass," Sam said, repeating what he'd just heard the dispatcher say over the radio. "That's government housing. Nothing good ever happens there."

"You're being a little harsh," Hopper said.

"Not really," Sam told him. "We get called down there all the time. Most of the city's murders happen within a few mile radius."

"So maybe this isn't even connected with our arsonist," Hopper tried. "Could be unrelated." Sam didn't answer.

Despite their speed of travel, a number of fire trucks were already on the scene, as well as a number of squad cars, which had already started setting up a perimeter. Even from a few blocks away, the

bright orange flames lit up the sidewalks and front porches.

"Don't get too close." Hopper put a hand on Sam's arm to make sure the other was listening. "You hear me? We're in Operation: Don't Ruffle the Chief's Feathers Any More Than They Already Are. He won't be happy if he finds you running around another crime scene when you aren't supposed to be."

Sam scowled, but didn't argue.

"Park over there," Hopper suggested, pointing to a gas station that was closed for the night. "We'll be able to see what's going on well enough."

"I want to look around back, first," Sam said, turning down a side street and taking up a more reasonable speed that wouldn't attract any attention.

During his twenty minute tour of the government housing district, Hopper had to agree with Sam's characterization of the area. It looked pretty shady. Rather than dwelling on that, he happily reflected that the absolute worst part of Hawkins (now that the lab had been shut down, of course) was the decrepit old farm house where old Mrs Peacock and he sons had lived. The house still didn't have electricity, and nobody went there because the family was weird and never left the property.

Sam's search proved fruitless, though. There were simply too many people moving about the projects, either driven onto the streets by the fire or possessing a natural nocturnal tendency, to identify one of them as their arsonist. Nothing on the police scanner the whole time had mentioned a suspect or a culprit, either. After more circling, Sam finally took Hopper's advice and parked at the closed gas station. He folded his arms and scowled at the fire through the windshield.

"We'll get him," Hopper tried to reassure him. "Sooner or later they always make a mistake and leave a trail. Maybe once the boys down at the station figure out what they're really dealing with, they'll be able to track him down. Just give it time."

"How many more places does he torch by then?" Sam asked. "The

people in these projects are packed in like sardines. Who knows how many people got caught inside this time."

Hopper squinted through the windshield and the steadily dancing flames in the distance, which had engulfed one corner of one of the housing complexes. All the fire trucks were arrayed around it, hosing it down to no measurable effect.

"I don't think he wants to kill a bunch of random people," Hopper thought out loud.

"You asked him?" Sam said humorlessly.

"Look at the fire," Hopper pointed. "It hasn't spread."

Sam leaned forward over the wheel to get a better look.

"You remember how fast that house went up yesterday," Hopper reminded him. "When our arsonist wants a place to go, it goes, and there's no stopping it. But it looks to me like this one hasn't spread since we got here."

Sam grunted.

"And you remember the fire-wall," Hopper pointed out. "It didn't spread, either. It just stayed right where he left it. Didn't move an inch."

"So?"

"So, maybe he's keeping it contained," Hopper suggested. "It seems like he can make the fire do anything he wants. If he told it not to spread beyond that one section of housing, maybe he wanted to burn somebody in particular, and spare anybody else who just happened to live next door. Maybe he cares about innocent people."

Sam grunted again.

The fire blazed on into the night and early morning. The fire trucks kept up their work, but they might not have bothered. After an hour or so, the one corner of the complex had disintegrated into a fine, black dust, and the flames finally burned themselves out. The other

three quarters of the complex still stood, miraculously untouched. By 5:30, Hopper was dying for breakfast, but Sam wasn't ready to leave, so he walked a few blocks to the nearest Tim Horton's and brought back a dozen donuts and two coffees. On his walk back, he thought about stopping at a payphone to call Joyce again, but, if he remembered her schedule right, she would already be off to work at Donald's.

When he made it back to the truck, Sam wasn't there. Hopper found him a block and a half closer to the burned down building, sitting on a heavily graffitied park bench. Hopper sat next to him and offered the coffee and box of donuts.

"Did I miss anything?" Hopper asked. All of the fire trucks and most of the police had left, though yards and yards of yellow tape still marked off a wide patch of the block.

"Not much," Sam said. "The boys took a few statements, but they didn't pick anyone up. It looks like they're about to head back empty handed."

Hopper leaned back on the bench and put his coffee down beside him. He watched the boys in blue-black uniforms mill about the taped-off crime scene, one by one returning to their squad cars to disappear.

"Who did they talk to?" Hopper asked.

"The kid by the broken payphone over there," Sam said, nodding in the direction instead of blatantly pointing. "That tall guy there with the red car, probably full of cocaine. This old couple who already left..."

"What about her?" Hopper asked, using his chin to point toward a girl sitting alone on a bench that had once been a bus stop before the bus had stopped running through that part of town.

"I don't think so," Sam said.

"She looks upset," Hopper told the other.

"Maybe she's upset cause her place just burned down," Sam said.

"Maybe." Hopper allowed. "Really, nobody talked to her?"

"She wasn't there earlier," Sam said.

"Sure she was," Hopper told him. "I saw her over by that alley when we first got here."

"Ok, so she wasn't RIGHT here earlier. The boys probably couldn't see her from way down there," Sam said.

"So she doesn't want to talk to cops-" Hopper began.

"Sure. In this place? She's probably a hooker," Sam said. "That's why she doesn't want to be around the cops."

"You really need to give people more of a chance," Hopper said with only half a smile. "I'm going to go ask her if she saw anything."

"I thought the plan was to not get too close this time," Sam said.

"It is, for you," Hopper told him. "Me? Your chief won't care if I go down there. I'm nobody. Just a concerned citizen." Hopper left his hat with Sam, thinking he'd look less like a cop without it, and wrapped up two donuts in a napkin. Slowly making his was down the street, he put a cigarette in his mouth but didn't light it. He aimed as if he was going to walk past the abandoned bus stop. He didn't want the girl to feel like she was under a stop light while he approached. He did make sure to be easily visible, though. He didn't want to scare her away by suddenly appearing form behind. When he was about level with the bus stop's bench, he slowed and made a show of feeling around in his pockets for a lighter. As he shifted the donuts from his left hand to his right so that he could check his left pocket for the mysteriously absent lighter, he let one of the donuts fall onto the sidewalk. He swore and knelt down to pick it up. He started to brush the specks of gravel off of the pink icing, and then looked up as awkwardly as he possibly could. The girl was looking down on him from her seat on the bench.

He gave a self conscious laugh as their eyes met. "Five second rule," he said, and took a bite of the doughnut. She gave him a look that was between humor and bemusement. Luckily, it was not at all

suspicious. He pulled himself up off the sidewalk and sat on the other end of her bench.

"Sorry," he said around the cigarette in his mouth. "You don't have a lighter, do you?"

She only scowled a little bit as she fished in her own pocket and held it out at arms length. He leaned into the tiny flame, and then leaned back against the bench.

"Crazy, isn't it?" He asked after a moment. "That whole place burning up like that? Or half of it, or whatever?" When she didn't answer right away, he glanced over at her.

"Yeah, crazy," she said, staring ahead at the building's remains.

"They ever say how many people were inside?" Hopper asked.

"I don't know," she told him. "A few, I think."

He shook his head sadly. "That's no way to go. It's the worst feeling in the world. I know. This one time, my garage caught fire. My fault. I had some old gas cans stacked up in the corner, and I was uh.. well" he flicked a few ashes from his cigarette and held it toward her with a guilty laugh. "Like I said, it was my fault. Here, you want one?" He offered her one of his cigarettes, which she took with only a little hesitation. She was a little young, but he'd been smoking a pack a day at her age, so he didn't feel too bad about feeding her habit.

"So anyway, those gas can just blew up," he mimed the explosion with his hands, almost dropping the donuts in the process. "My garage caught fire, and I started knocking over things trying to find something to put it out. Of course, I didn't have anything. Then this whole sheet of plywood I had leaned up against the wall, it caught fire too, and then it fell in front of the door. So then I was too scared to try and climb over it. I've never been so scared in my life. I got lucky, cause my friend was outside and he ended up pulling me out. When he came running over, I was trying to poke the plywood with a shovel and push it out of the way." He laughed at himself. "Never been so scared in my life," he repeated, and glanced over at her. She seemed to be listening to the story, at least.

"Look," he said, pulling up one sleeve. "This is where I got burned. Years ago, and you can still see it." She looked over at his burn scar without any hesitation, so he decided the time was right to offer her the doughnut.

"You want this one? I'm not going to eat both." When she took it, he looked back to the aftermath of the fire. "So you have any idea what happened?"

She glanced over at him just a little sharply. "Are you a cop?" She asked.

"Nope," he said. "I just had a friend who got caught inside the.. the fire."

"You had a friend?" She asked. "Here? You're not from anywhere around here."

"You caught me," Hopper said with an easy laugh. "I'm not from around here. Hawkins Indiana, born and raised."

She frowned over at him, then took another bite of the doughnut. "Never heard of it."

"You wouldn't have," he told her. "It's small, quiet. You'd like it there. People are more real."

"It's quiet?" She asked.

"Most of the time."

"What do you people do for fun?"

"We find things," he said defensively. "Sometimes fun is overrated. Peace and quiet's worth more."

"So why are you here?" She asked him.

"You seem pretty smart, so I'll be honest with you," he said, keeping his eyes on the burned out building. "I'm looking for someone. I heard some stories."

"What kind of stories?"

"Stories about somebody who starts fires," Hopper told her, still not looking at her.

"Anybody can start a fire," she said, a strange tone taking over her voice.

Hopper put his cigarette down and turned fully on the bench to face her. "Not like this. This is different." He narrowed his eyes a little, wondering if he should push his hunch all the way or not. "And I think you know that, don't you?"

She turned away so fast her neck might have snapped, and Hopper leaned leaned a few inches closer.

"I remember seeing you earlier," he told her. "Before the fire died down. You were standing over there, right?" He pointed.

"I don't know," she mumbled, still looking away.

"Weren't you wearing a jacket then?" Hopper asked. When she didn't answer, he put the cigarette back in his mouth and stood up. There was a beaten up old trash can at the opposite end of the bus stop. He started toward it.

"You live inside there?" He asked.

"Why all the questions?" She replied. "You sound like a cop."

He looked down into the trash can and found what he was looking for. He reached in and dug out the lightweight blue jacket. He held it up so that she could see him inspecting it. She shifted the other way on the bench so she was again facing away from him again.

Hopper poked at the jacket, at the big patch of burned, black fabric on the left sleeve. "You were inside when the fire started," he told rather than asked her.

She started to get up off the bench.

Dropping the burned jacket back in the trash can, he crossed the

sidewalk to intercept her.

"Hang on a minute," he said, crouching down directly in front of her so that their eyes were level. "Please," he said, almost forcibly holding her gaze. "Help me out."

She tried to slide around him and he again moved to intercept. "Look at what just happened here," he told her. "These fires. This isn't the first one. It won't be the last one. Whoever this guy is, I need to find him. I think you understand that. So help me out. You know something."

"Why do you care?" She demanded.

"People died in there," Hopper said. "People who lived here their whole lives. I don't need to tell you. Maybe they were friends of yours. This can't happen again. We need to find this guy."

"We?" She ask, scowling at him. "You and the other cops?"

"You want this guy running around free, starting fires?" Hopper asked her.

"He's not like that," she blurted out.

"Not like what?" Hopper demanded.

"He's not..." She snapped her mouth shut and turned away from him again.

Sighing slowly, Hopper slid back onto the bench and gave her some space. "I believe you," he said. "That's why I'm here. Just me. If the cops do find this guy, they'll shoot first and ask questions later. So I'm here asking questions. I think maybe there's more to this guy. Help me out. Maybe it doesn't have to end so bad."

"I don't know anything," she said. "I can't help you."

"If I WAS a cop, I'd think you were protecting this guy," Hopper said.

"I don't even know him."

"But you saw him inside?"

She shrugged.

"Do you know why he started the fire?" Hopper asked.

She shrugged again.

"The people inside, the ones who didn't make it out, did they know him?" Hopper pressed.

She didn't answer.

"Work with me," Hopper pleaded. "You could save innocent people here. Do you want more fires? Do you want him to keep doing it?"

"There weren't any innocent people caught inside," she said.

"You were inside," Hopper said.

"And he pulled me out!" she snapped.

Hopper stared for a long moment, giving her time to explain, but she didn't.

"He saved you?" Hopper asked.

She scowled at him sideways.

"The same guy who started the fire? He pulled you out?"

"Yes," she said at last. "As soon as he saw me, he ran back inside to get me. When I was next to him... the fire didn't touch me."

"And you saw him moving the fire around with his hands?" Hopper asked. She gave him a surprised look, but didn't try to deny it. "Why would he go out of his way to make sure you were safe?" Hopper asked her. "Does he know you?"

She shook her head.

Hopper sank a little deeper into the bench, frowning in deep thought. "I'd really like to talk to this guy," Hopper told her. "I think I could

help him. I could keep things from turning really ugly."

"Well I can't help you," she said. "I've never seen him before today."

"Why did he do it, though?" Hopper asked.

"Why do you think?" She said in exasperation. "Don't they have places like this in Hawkings?"

"Hawkins," he corrected her.

"A cop like you should know better," she told him. "Those guys inside, the ones who didn't make it out-"

"You knew them?" Hopper asked.

"Some of them."

"You don't seem too broken up."

"Cause I knew them," she said. "They probably had it coming."

"That sounds a little harsh," Hopper said. "Who were they?"

"The kind of people who won't talk to cops," she told him. "I guess the kind of people they don't have in Hawkings. The kind of people who end up in jail or shot. If I could move fire with my hands, why would I come all the way down here, burn up one little corner of the projects, and make sure only certain people never made it out alive?"

Hopper smiled at her. "You'd make a pretty good cop yourself, kid."

She snorted in disgust.

Mike followed behind El as she pushed open Dustin's screen door again. He wasn't sure if El just wanted to go out and enjoy the sunshine, or if she felt safer having Allie outside of the house. Fighting with the broken hinge, El stopped in the doorway and examined it. She turned back to Mike.

"Does Dustin have tools?" She asked.

"Somewhere," Mike shrugged. "He builds a lot of Heath Kits, so he must." They searched around the house for a few minutes until they found Dustin's tool box, with tools as diverse in their use as rough carpentry and fine electrical work, thrown and piled inside until the lid wouldn't close. Mike tried digging through it to find a screwdriver, but after stabbing himself on a small drywall saw, he just poured the whole thing out onto the kitchen floor. A screwdriver with part of the handle missing rolled against El's foot, and she picked it up.

"Terminator," she said out of the blue, shifting Allie into one hand so she could remove the offending door hinge. "Dustin couldn't explain it either."

Mike knelt down and started picking up the scattered tools. "It does make sense," Mike insisted, repeating the defense of James Cameron he'd made a few times before. "Kyle Reese is John's father. When they first met each other some time in the future, John already knew Kyle would go back in time and become his father, but Kyle had no idea who he was. John gave him that picture of his mom, because he already knew Kyle was supposed to have the picture when he went back time. It's not a loop. It's just one possible future going back and creating another branch point, creating another possible future." He started arranging Dustin's tools in order according to size, color, and purpose.

"But..."She said, putting the screws back in to the door hinge. "Back to the Future..."

"Same thing," Mike said. "Whenever Marty changes something in the past, it creates an alternate possible future. So the future that he left still exists, but now he's on the path to a different future, based on the changes he made. All those futures exist in parallel, but John Connor or Marty are limited to the particular path that they're on."

El held up the screwdriver thoughtfully, then pointed at an empty spot in the air. "Infinite possible futures?" She said.

"Right," Mike said. "Every possible decision every person makes creates another possible future that stems from that point in time, like the branches of a tree. And each of those branches has small

branches splitting off, and each of those has smaller branches, infinitely."

El pointed with the screwdriver to another empty spot in the air. "And infinite possible pasts?"

"Yeah," Mike said. "Past is just perspective, looking back from one of those branches. You'd see only the branch that led to where you're standing. You can't see all the other branches that led to other presents. But if time stretches back to infinity, then there would be an infinite possible number of paths leading to any particular present, like the roots of a tree instead of the branches. Only, it's all perspective, again. Because the present only seems like the trunk of the tree because we're in it. Really, each branch and root would look like its own trunk if you were standing on it."

El's screwdriver pointer was still frozen in the air, indicating the invisible timeline. "How do they know which past is the right one to go to?" She said.

Mike opened his mouth, then closed it. He covered the silence by closing the lid on Dustin's toolbox, which now comfortably held all of his tools with room to spare, neatly organized and sorted.

Dustin cruised down Kerley road, as he always did, his mind drifting off as he deftly avoided the potholes by instinct. After living in Hawkins for so many years, he could have driven Kerley with his eyes closed. Over the years, he had grown to like that familiarity. It was markedly different from the first decade or so of his life, where his family had moved around so often that he'd never been able to make lasting friends or really call any place his "hometown."

Another familiar and equally pleasant sight caught his eye up ahead. Dustin beeped his horn gently and slowed down as he approached the white van painted with giant ice cream cones and brightly colored cartoon characters. Hank, the ice cream truck driver, who Dustin knew well, also stopped. He was heading the opposite direction on Kerley on his way back into town, but Dustin was a regular customer, so Hank wouldn't have ignored him. They both pulled onto opposite shoulders of the road, though traffic on Kerely was light enough that

they might not have needed to. Dustin got out of his car and went up to the van as Hank rolled down his window.

"I drove past your house, but I saw your car was gone," Hank said. "Figured I'd missed you this time."

"Not a chance," Dustin told him with a grin. "I can tell when you're close. It's like a sixth sense."

Hank chuckled at the joke. "You have house guests? I thought I saw some people in your back yard."

"Uh, yeah," Dustin said. "Some friends are staying with me for a few days." He picked out an ice cream Tweetie Bird on a stick for himself, a strawberry eclair for El, and an orange pushup for Mike, or for himself if Mike didn't want it. He handed Hank the cash, plus an extra two dollars for his troubles. Dustin always made sure to keep on the very best of terms with the ice cream man.

"Pleasure doing business with you, as usual," Hank said. "This is more than I've sold all afternoon."

"The kids aren't out playing today?" Dustin asked. "Or their parents just don't want to fork over the money?"

Hank shrugged. "Both. That's how it is, sometimes. I even tried selling to those weird guys in suits over on Mintdale road, but they didn't want to give me the time of day."

Dustin's heart skipped a beat.

"Suits?" Dustin asked, his throat suddenly dry.

"Yeah, two of 'em," Hank said as he folded the money and tucked it away. "In a black car. I figure they were building-code inspectors or somebody from the county, since they were taking pictures and poking around."

"Mintdale road, you said?" Dustin asked him in a rush.

"Yeah, about a half mile down," Hank said, leaning out the window to point. "Why?"

"No reason," Dustin said, already moving back toward his car.

"Is something wrong?" Hank asked, a note of alarm in his voice.

"It's nothing," Dustin said, taking the last three steps to his car at a jog. "I just forgot something." He sped off down Kerley without saying goodbye to Hank. Kerley met Mintdale a very short distance away, and Dustin could still see the ice cream truck in his rear view mirror as he ignored the rusted old stop sign and turned on Mintdale.

The road went up a little hill, so Dustin couldn't see what lay ahead until he reached the top.

He felt cold sweat bead up on his skin as the shape of a black sedan rose into view just past the crest of the hill.

The car was parked on the side of the road, and Dustin had time to notice two men in suits sitting in the car before he caught himself, and forced his eyes straight ahead. The last thing he wanted was for them to catch him staring. With his hands squeezing the steering wheel to death, he tried not to move a muscle and keep his speed steady. He wanted to stop and get a better look at them, but he also wanted to slam on the gas and get away from them as fast as he could. He couldn't risk drawing suspicion, though, so he kept perfectly still as he rolled past with his eyes locked in the twelve o'clock position. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw the men in suits turn to watch him go. Clenching his hands even tighter, he forced himself not to react. As the black car slid into line with his rear view mirror, he tried to get a good look at the license plate. It was a little far away, but he could tell that it wasn't a County plate. It wasn't even an Indiana plate.

He rolled on down the road at a frustratingly slow pace until he reached the next cross road and the black sedan was out of sight behind him. Dustin paused at the stop sign and fought to come to a decision. It might be nothing. Just as Hank had said, they might have been some kind of building code inspectors, but Dustin needed to be sure. Taking a purposeful in and out breath, he tried to calm his nerves, then turned around in the intersection and headed back the way he'd come.

To his relief, the black sedan was gone when he returned to the top of the hill. Driving past them a second time would have been very suspicious. On a hunch, he pulled off the road and parked where they had. Their recent tire tracks in the long grass made it easy for him to get the spot right. Dustin let the car idle for a minute as he cast his gaze around to see what the men in black might have been looking at. At the top of a little hill, as he was, he was able to see over a lot of the trees and cornfields that surrounded Hawkins. Though his own house was on a different street, it wasn't that far, if you drew a straight line on a map. His hand starting to shake with nerves, Dustin reached into his glove box and took out that pair of binoculars that an old friend had taught him to always keep handy.

Afraid to confirm his own suspicions, Dustin raised the binoculars to his eyes and swept them drown the hill and across the trees. Several houses were visible in the near distance.

His own peeling shingles, gravel driveway, and unpainted door frame slid into view.

His heart beating faster, Dustin leaned his head out of the window and looked down at the tire tracks again to make sure he was parked exactly where the men in black had been. He was.

With an unsteady hand, he put the car into reverse and backed up a few feet. Raising the binoculars again, he could no longer see his house. From his new angle, it was completely obscured by trees. He put the car into drive and crept forward another four or five feet. Again he checked through the binoculars, and again his line of sight was blocked by trees. He backed one last time to the exact spot where the black sedan had been, and there was his house again, in perfect view.

Dustin threw the binoculars onto the seat and tore off down Mintdale, throwing a tail of gravel behind him. He wondered if it would be safe for him to go back home, if he should instead get to a phone and call Mike and El to warn them. But they didn't have a car of their own to escape in, so he'd need to get them himself. Afraid that he'd run into the black sedan again on the road home, Dustin raced back down Mintdale and back onto Kerley. So far so good.

He was nearly bouncing up and down behind the wheel as he ran through escape options in his mind. Would it be better to head into town and try to hide in a crowd, or get out of town completely and hope the agents wouldn't be able to track them? How many agents was he dealing with? Had they already placed a net around his house where they'd spot him coming and going from any direction? Or had he sprung their trap before it was set?

His house came into view up ahead as Dustin ate up the country road at well over 80 miles an hour. He was relieved beyond words to see there were no black cars or white vans already parked in his driveway waiting for him. That didn't mean they weren't parked somewhere else, though, watching from a distance.

He skidded to a stop in his gravel driveway and threw the car door open, forgetting to put it into park. The car rolled a few feet before he jumped back in and stopped it. Suddenly he wondered if agents had already visited his house while he was gone. He envisioned finding the place empty, with signs of a struggle. If El had been there when the agents showed up, well then Dustin felt bad for the agents. On the other hand, baby Allie might have really complicated things.

Almost tripping on his front porch, Dustin threw open the door and burst into his house, shouting for Mike and El. He found them in the kitchen, looking up at him in alarm. Grabbing the dining room table to stop himself, he said "We need to go. Right. Now."

"Dustin?" Mike asked. "What-"

"There's no time," Dustin told him. "Leave everything, and get in the car. We have to run."

"What happened?" Mike asked, still not moving from the kitchen.

"Agents." Dustin fumbled around for words. "We're being watched."

"Slow down," Mike began, but Dustin slapped his hand hard on the table to cut him off.

"Bad men, Mike! Bad men!" Dustin wheeled around and hurried back to the car with El suddenly tight on his heels and Mike stumbling to

keep up.

4. Chapter 4

Firebaby

Chapter 4

"Slow down Dustin, you're speeding," Mike said. "If a regular cop pulls us over, the agents will find out where we are right away."

"What if the regular cops are working for the agents?" Dustin countered, though he did ease up on the gas pedal. "This is bad," he said after a minute. "Real bad."

"Tell me again, slowly," Mike said.

"They were agents," Dustin said, trying to slow down his racing thoughts. "Had to be. Two men in black suits in a black car with a license plate from who-knows-where... and they were spying on the house, Mike."

"This doesn't make sense," Mike said. "Hawkins Lab got shut down. Why would they come after El again after all this time?"

"I don't think it's El they're after," Dustin said, glancing into the rear view mirror at El, who was again talking and humming to Allie.

"But why?" Mike moaned.

"The government wants weapons, Mike," Dustin told him.

"You're speeding again," Mike reminded him.

"What are we going to do?" Dustin asked, again dropping to somewhere close to the speed limit.

"I don't know," Mike said.

Dustin again looked into the rear view mirror, but El seemed occupied with the task of keeping the baby calm.

"I've got it," Dustin said. "What about Will's house?"

"But he lives all the way in Chicago," Mike protested.

"All the better," Dustin said. "It's far away from here, where the agents know to look for us, and it's got way more places to hide."

Mike considered it for a minute. "How do we get there without being caught?" He asked.

"We take the back roads," Dustin said. "It'll be easier to see if we're being followed. Unless..." he craned his neck in front of the steering wheel to check for helicopters.

"This has to be some kind of mistake," Mike said. "Where were they for the last ten years?"

"Watching," Dustin told him. "They probably didn't know what little Allie could do until a few days ago."

"Dustin slow DOWN," Mike said. Dustin looked at the speedometer and immediately let up on the pedal. He tried to take a calming breath and flexed his fingers open and closed on the steering wheel to relieve the tension, but it didn't help.

"Maybe we should stick to roads that have at least some tree cover," Dustin suggested, "just in case they do bring a helicopter."

"I don't see how we can make it all the way to Chicago without being seen," Mike said.

"Maybe we can lose them IN Chicago," Dustin said. "More cars to hide behind. We could disappear in a crowd."

"I don't think it's that easy," Mike said.

"Maybe we ditch the car," Dustin thought out loud. "We go in the front door of some public place, abandon the car, and come out the back door. They'll never expect that. Then we pick up a new car and drive off."

"How are we going to pick up a new car?" Mike demanded.

"Steal one?" Dustin asked, both Mike and himself.

"Do you know how to steal a car? Because I don't," Mike said tersely.

"Maybe we could pay some gangsters to create a distraction," Dustin said thoughtfully. "A distraction to keep the agents busy while we slip away. There's probably a lot of gangsters in Chicago."

Mike shook his head in annoyance.

Dustin's eyes snapped up to see flashing lights in the rear view mirror.

"Dustin!" Mike yelled, looking down at the speedometer again.

"Ohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygod," Dustin said, his eyes locked on the rear view mirror. Instinctively, his foot pressed even harder on the gas pedal.

"What are you doing?" Mike demanded. "We can't outrun them."

"Ohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygod," Dustin repeated, though he somehow kept control of his instinct to slam his foot down and, hopefully, rocket away to safety. Maybe he could get off the road and lose them in the trees, he wondered.

"Dustin, just pull over," Mike said. "It's probably not even the agents. It's just a normal cop who saw us speeding. It we're really lucky, we can just take the ticket and leave."

"How do you know he doesn't work for the agents?" Dustin demanded, his foot poised over the brake pedal but somehow unable to touch it.

"How do you think it'll turn out if we end up in a high speed car chase?" Mike demanded.

Dustin glanced at El in the rear view mirror again. "El, can you get a reading on that guy?" He asked her. "Is he an agent?"

She turned around in the back seat and looked, but didn't answer.

"It doesn't work like that, Dustin," Mike said, annoyed.

"How do you know?" Dustin asked.

"Just pull over," Mike said. "It's probably just a normal county cop. We'll just tell him we weren't paying attention to the speed limit and that we're really sorry, and then he'll let us go."

"Or he'll call the agents," Dustin grumbled, but he had already started to slow down and pull to the side of the road. "I don't feel good about this," he said, for the record.

El was kneeling in the back seat now, staring intently out the rear window. Dustin finally brought the car to a full stop, and the police car pulled up behind him, those threateningly bright lights still flashing.

"Ohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygod," Dustin said, pressing both hands against his forehead.

"Just stay calm," Mike said. "Act like everything's normal."

"El, seriously, if you sense anything, tell me now," Dustin said.

"Will you stop that?" Mike scolded him. "It doesn't work that way."

Dustin heard a car door slam, and he glanced back to see the officer approaching. With the strongest possible reservations, he rolled down his window. Cold sweat was breaking out all over his body. He felt like a zebra just sitting down and letting a hungry lion walk right up to it.

The officer removed his sunglasses and gazed down at Dustin with an unreadable expression. "Do you know what the speed limit is out here?" He asked.

"Uhh..." Dustin tried.

"Fifty five," the officer said impatiently. "Do you know how fast you were going?"

"Listen officer..." Dustin glanced at the man's badge, which read Tim Sivils, Roan County Sheriff's Department. "Officer Sivils. I can explain."

"It's my fault, officer," Mike said. "We're on the way to the airport. I had the departure time wrong, so we got going half an hour late, and I kept pushing him to go faster."

Dustin gulped nervously. That wasn't a very good lie. What if the cop asked to see the plane ticket that didn't exist?

Officer Sivils leaned down and peered inside the car, first at Mike, then at El and Allie in the back. Mike's face was as nervous and guilty as Dustin's. El's was, as usual, unreadable. The officer inspected their faces for a long time. Did his gaze linger too long on the baby, Dustin wondered? At long last, he said, "License and registration."

Dustin handed them over with shaking fingers.

"Anything in the car I should know about?" He asked.

"No." Dustin and Mike said together.

Staring at them like a woodland predator about to bite, the officer prowled back to his squad car.

"Ohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygod," Dustin said as soon as they were alone.

"Try and stay calm," Mike hissed. "You're going to give us away.

"El, I need to know if this guy's an agent or not," Dustin said.

"He's not," Mike said. "He probably just thinks you look like you're hiding something."

"Me?" Dustin protested. "YOU look like you're hiding something. Hey, maybe we make a run for it now," he suggested.

"I'm telling you, no high speed car chase," Mike said. "Did you see what happened to Rodney King? We'd never make it."

"No, I mean, on foot," Dustin said. "We head into the forest," he pointed over Mike's shoulder at the thick trees lining the road. "We could lose him in there."

"You're out of your mind," Mike told him.

"Hey, is he taking longer than usual?" Dustin asked, watching the parked cop car in his rear view mirror. "How long does it take to write a ticket?"

El had again turned all the way around in the back seat and was watching intently out the window. Allie rested quietly in her arms, unaware of the danger they might or might not have been in.

"Look, he's coming now," Mike said. "See? We're in the clear."

"I don't feel good about this," Dustin said again. He watched the cop approach, and the slowness and casualness of his gait only served to keep Dustin in suspense even longer.

When he did finally reach Dustin's window, the officer held out the license and registration. "You don't have any points on your license, so I'm going to let you off with a warning," he said, though his eyes still roved over them like a tiger surveying a few stray sheep.

"Th-thanks officer," Dustin said. "I'll be more careful."

The radio clipped to his shoulder squawked, and the officer inclined his head to speak into it.

"Go for Sivils, over."

Dustin couldn't make out the response.

"Stand by," the cop said, and took a few steps away from their car.

Dustin looked over at Mike, feeling ice pour into his veins. "What's happening?" He asked.

"I don't know," Mike said impatiently. "It could be nothing. Maybe they're calling him away for something else."

"Right, right, that makes sense," Dustin said, trying to reassure himself. The cop had taken a few more steps away from their car in the course of his conversation with the voice on his radio. "Look," Dustin said. "He gave me back my driver's license, and he gave me a

warning. Doesn't that mean we're free to go?"

"I don't think so," Mike said.

"But he's finished with us, technically," Dustin insisted. "He's not even in his car. If I take off right now-"

"No," Mike said. "We act natural, remember? As far as he knows, we're nobody special."

Dustin's heart stopped beating.

Mike might have kept talking, but Dustin couldn't hear him. His vision shrank to a small tunnel as he saw a lone black sedan pull up to park neatly behind the police car.

Too afraid to even speak, Dustin watched as the officer looked up from his conversation on the radio, and trudged back toward his car and the new arrival. If his heart had stopped before, it suddenly started up again, like a hammer inside his chest. He watched in cold and terrified silence as the officer approached the black sedan.

Two men in suits got out, slowly and casually, as if they were in control of the situation. One of them reached inside his suit jacket.

"We're dead," Dustin moaned.

The agent in the suit pulled his hand out and showed a badge to the officer. They continued to speak for what felt like hours, but might have been only seconds.

"What do we do, Mike?" Dustin asked. "We can't just sit here and let them take us. We run or we fight. At least right now there's only three of them. If we wait-" His voice stopped working as the officer turned and headed toward their car. The two agents remained with their black sedan, talking emotionlessly to each other.

"I'm going to make a run for it," Dustin said, his fingers fumbling over the ignition, though his hands didn't seem to want to obey.

The officer stopped even with Dustin's window. With one hand resting on his holster, he said "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to ask

you to step out of the car."

Dustin's mouth went dry. His brain struggled between fight, flight, and shutting down. His eyes darted between the cop and the agents. What were their chances if they ran for it right-

Something exploded inside the car, shattering one of the windows and blasting the cop off his feet. Dustin felt the shockwave pass over him like a hurricane. He swung his head around in search of what had just happened. El leaned over his shoulder from the back seat and thrust the baby into Mike's arms.

"Stay here," she said.

Before Dustin could fully comprehend, she was already out of the car. The cop was trying to stand back up. El held one hand palm down, and the cop was pressed against the ground spread eagle as if the earth had turned into a magnet.

She turned her back on him and looked toward the two agents, who Dustin saw reach inside their suit jackets. With a flick of her hand, El sent them both flying ten feet into the air. Before they hit the ground, she flicked a finger, and their guns were torn out of their hands and sailed off somewhere into the trees. She swept a hand upward, and their black sedan kicked back onto its rear bumper and then toppled over to rest upside down in the ditch on the side of the road. With another gesture, she upended the police car, too. It's flashing lights crunched and shattered when it landed. She returned her attention to the cop, who was breathing as heavily as if one of those cars had fallen onto his chest. She waved her hand at his gun, which ripped itself out of his holster and flew off to join the others among the trees. Leaning over him and looking hard into his eyes, she said, "Please don't follow us. I don't want to hurt you." The cop wheezed and struggled to speak against the weight pressing on his lungs.

El slid back into the back seat of their car.

"Go, Dustin," she told him. His hands still fumbled with the ignition, but once he got it started, it felt great to floor the gas pedal and tear off down the country road. The wind ripped at Dustin's hair, both from his own window, which was still rolled down, and El's window,

which no longer existed. He could see her face in the rear view mirror. It had been years and years since he'd seen her nose bleed, but he'd never been happier to see anything in his life.

Hopper dug through his white, paper Wendy's bag looking for his straw.

"Could she ID the guy if we brought him in?" Sam asked,barely interested in his own food.

"I don't think you'd get her inside a police station," Hopper said. "Not without handcuffs. You're missing the point, though."

"What am I missing?"

"That this guy, our arsonist, saved her from his own fire," Hopper told him.

"So I'm supposed to like him now?" Sam asked. "He's a real hero. He saved one girl, after he killed maybe a dozen others."

"But look at who he killed, and who he didn't," Hopper pointed out. "You were the one who said there was a connection between the warehouse fire and the one in the rich neighborhood. And then last night he went back inside the burning building to make sure she got out safe. It looks to me like he's going after a very specific group of people. Maybe they're all part of that same gang."

"Could be the Nortenas. So he's a vigilante, cleaning up the streets of Sacramento?" Sam scoffed.

Hopper chewed his burger as he considered. "Maybe. Or maybe they did something to him and he's got a grudge against them."

"Ok, so he's not indiscriminate," Sam said. "But it's still murder. We still have to find him and bring him in."

"Just how do you think that would go?" Hopper asked, his voice sharp for the first time. "Think about it. Let's say you corner this guy and surround him. You could line up twenty squad cars, even the whole SWAT team and tell this guy to come out with his hands in the

air or you shoot. What do YOU think happens next?" When Sam didn't answer, Hopper answered for him. "He blows up the whole street? Every officer, plus the people in their houses for two blocks in every direction?"

In a calmer voice Hopper finished, "Maybe there's a better way. Maybe we can convince him to give it up."

"Look, I'm not saying you're wrong," Sam half apologized, "But how are we gonna do that? Ask him nicely?"

Hopper shrugged. "We have to find him first, or we can't ask him anything. But when we do, I think it'll go better for everyone if you don't approach him with your gun and handcuffs. We treat it like a hostage situation, with the whole city block as hostages."

Sam grimaced.

"Or like a terrorist with a bomb in his van," Hopper went on. "Like those crazies who drove a truck bomb into the World Trade Center."

Sam winced even harder.

"My point is, he's not a common criminal, so we'd better not act like he is, or it'll end badly," Hopper finished.

"And we're the only ones who know what the situation really is," Sam said darkly.

"I kind of like it that way," Hopper told him. "It's hard enough to convince YOU not to go in guns blazing. I'd hate to try to convince your chief the same thing."

"You're a persuasive guy," Sam said, finally lightening up. "Maybe you'd win him over."

"The chief always thinks they know best, no matter where you go," Hopper said. "That's how they hire chiefs, I think. You have to be cocky, condescending, full of yourself..."

"How did the boys in Hawkins ever put up with you?" Sam asked.

"I still ask myself that," Hopper told him.

Sam at last dug into his food. Hopper was so far ahead he'd almost finished.

"So those two officers who died in the warehouse fire," Hopper said, gently, "you had time to see their families yet? How are they holding up?"

Sam looked up from his food with a puzzled expression. "There weren't any officers in that warehouse fire."

Hopper wrinkled his forehead. "I thought you said-"

"No, Mark and Jeff died a few days before," Sam told him. "It wasn't related to this."

"Sorry, I thought... When you told me, I guess I just assumed," Hopper said.

"No," Sam said sadly. "It was a freak accident, really. They got sent to give the news to a family. Worst part of the job, when you have to tell a family that you've got their kid's body down at the city morgue. This was last... uh, Tuesday, I think. I wasn't even in that day. I had to drive all the way up to San Francisco to appear at this court case, an appeal for a guy I put in jail a year ago. So Mark and Jeff showed up at an apartment to give the bad news to a family, and they were inside when..." Sam dropped his food on the table and stared at Hopper with his mouth open. He swore at himself.

"What's wrong with me?" Sam said. "I've been so focused on this arsonist, I never even... Hop! They were inside, when they got caught in a house fire."

"What?"

"A house fire, that's what the report said," Sam said, his words coming out in a torrent. "I told you, I wasn't there. I cam back the next day, and I heard it from everybody else. The report was a house fire. Mark and Jeff just happened to be inside this apartment complex informing a family, and there was a fire. A few people, including them, never made it out."

Hopper swore, too.

"I can't believe I..."

"You don't know it was the same guy," Hopper warned him.

"What are the chances?" Sam said. "The day before I saw the Arsonist, Mark and Jeff die in a fire? What are the chances it's not the same guy?"

Hopper stared down at the table, his mind jumping to all kinds of conclusions.

"I just can't believe I-" Sam said again.

"We need to read that file," Hopper interrupted. "We need to know why those two cops were there. Who were they giving the news to. Who else lived in that apartment."

"Right," Sam said, his eyes drifting off as his own mind ran on ahead of him.

"You've got to talk to somebody down at the station," Hopper continued. "A friend who will do you a favor. Somebody who will get the file and let you read it without your chief knowing. If there's a connection, we need to find it."

"Yeah," Sam agreed, pushing his char back from the table and standing up. "There's a few people. I can get that file. Let's go."

Dustin set his cruise as exactly fifty five miles an hour so he wouldn't again draw the attention of any random cops who weren't already looking for them. Those two agents and their overturned car were miles behind him now, but he couldn't keep from checking the rear view mirror every few seconds. Each time, he fully expected to see a whole fleet of cars chasing them down.

"I still say Will's house is the best option," Dustin told them. "We'll have to ditch this car, though. It's marked."

"Marked?" Mike asked shortly.

"Yeah, you know, they know this car, and they'll pick it up wherever we go," Dustin explained.

"Why didn't you just say that?" Mike asked.

"It's easier to say we're marked," Dustin protested. He glanced into the back seat again, where El was talking and humming to the baby, who was blissfully unaware of their problems. "Hey, El, do you think you could steal us a car?"

"Dustin," Mike warned.

"I mean, just pop the locks from the outside so we can get in," Dustin said, more to Mike now that El. "I've seen in movies where they hotwire the ignition. It can't be that hard."

"I don't think you can just figure something like that out," Mike said, rolling his eyes. "Besides, if we steal a car, the police will come looking for it."

"You're right, we need something that isn't marked," Dustin said. Mike rolled his eyes again.

"How much cash do you have in the bank?" Dustin asked. "We'd have to find a small dealership, one that's willing to take cash upfront with no questions asked, otherwise we'll leave a paper trail that the agents can follow."

Mike shook his head in annoyance.

"But we'd better not walk into a bank, either," Dustin went on. "They have cameras inside. The agents might tap into those cameras. Maybe we pay a kid to take your card up to an ATM and then bring us the cash. That'll throw them off our trail at least for a little while."

"That's the worst plan I've ever heard, Dustin," Mike said.

"Well I don't hear you coming up with any ideas, Mr. Negative," Dustin tossed back.

Mike slumped forward and put his face in his hands.

"Let's go through our options, then," Dustin said. "Fact: we'll never make it all the way to Chicago in this car, because it's marked."

Mike shook his head, still in his hands.

"Option 1: we steal a car. Option 2: we buy a car. Option 3: we find someone who's willing to give us a ride. You've already ruled out option 1. Option 3 would put someone else in danger. You don't want to drag someone else in between us and the agents, do you?"

Mike didn't answer.

"So, the way I see it, that leaves option 2," Dustin went on. "We have to stop at a bank, get in and out before the agents realize we're there, and then find someone who will sell us a car on the spot. It's possible we'll have to deal with someone pretty shady. We should be prepared for that going in."

"This is insane," Mike groaned. "Why now? Why is this happening now?"

"I think that's pretty obvious," Dustin told him. "Hang on, I didn't think about trains. Maybe we can hop on a northbound train and get off when it stops in Chicago."

"I don't think trains work like that anymore," Mike complained.

"El could just float us on top of one when it slows down,'" Dustin continued uninterrupted. "And then we drop in through the top. It could work. We'd be totally untraceable on a train. It might be the safest option, unless El can just fly us all the way to Chicago. Wait..." He turned all the way around in his seat, taking his eyes off the road to look at El. "You can't fly us all the way to Chicago... can you?"

"Dustin!" Mike yelled.

Forty minutes later, Dustin inched the car closer to the Standard Federal Bank in the little town of Cherokee Indiana, which was large enough to support exactly one bank, one Shell gas station, and one Chicken Coop fast food restaurant. He craned his neck around the steering wheel, looking for security cameras mounted on the bank's roof or the nearby telephone poles.

"I still think it's a bad idea for you to go inside yourself," Dustin told Mike. "You should pay some kid to walk up to the ATM for you. That way they won't see you on the cameras."

"I'm not doing that," Mike told him flatly. "Are you going to park or not?"

"Are you kidding?" Dustin asked him. "We can't bring a marked car into a bank parking lot. They'll see us for sure. I'm going to keep circling, in case they identify you and we have to make a run for it, I'll be able to pick you up. I'll slow down, El can open the door, and you just jump in. Maybe she can even give you a little pull."

Mike shook he head angrily and got out of the car, closing the door a little harder than Dustin thought was necessary, but he didn't say anything. He knew Mike was under a lot of stress. He pulled back onto the road and turned at the first corner, now driving along the bank's side. He watched Mike walk right up to the front doors and go inside. Dustin felt his muscles tense even further. He tried to move his shoulders around to relax them. He wouldn't have walked right into place with cameras and security guards, not with a target on his back like that.

"How is Allie taking all this?" Dustin asked, checking on them in his rear view mirror.

"I'm keeping her calm," El told him.

"That's good," he said. "Are you Ok? Do your batteries need recharging? You did a lot back there."

"I'm alright."

"Are you sure? I still have a Hershey's with almonds." He reached into the glove box and fished it out. He turned the car again, this time into the parking lot of a coin laundry that ran behind the bank. El took the offered candy bar. He opened his mouth again, wanting to say that everything would be alright, but he stopped short. Did he really believe that, he asked himself. The last time he'd been through anything similar, the danger hadn't passed until the director of Hawkins Lab, and dozens of his henchmen, had been killed or eaten

by a monster. If someone from the government had decided to come after El and baby Allie, what would it take to make them stop this time? How far would Mike and El have to run before they made it to safety? How long would they need to hide before the agents gave up their search? His hands working on their own as his eyes glazed over, Dustin turned from the coin laundry into the Chicken Coop parking lot, having nearly looped all the way around the bank by now.

"Dustin," El said softly, breaking through his unhappy thoughts. "They aren't after you."

He understood what she meant, and it filled him with warmth and joy, erasing all his doubts. "Forget it," he told her. "I'm with you guys till the end." He grinned. "Those agents'll never take me alive."

"Thank you," she said,putting a hand on his shoulder. He wouldn't have traded those words for anything.

They had to circle the bank twice more before Mike finally emerged. When he did, there were no uniformed guards hot on his tail, thankfully. Mike fast-walked across the parking lot and got into the car. Dustin pulled away as fast as he dared without drawing attention.

"No problems?" Dustin asked.

"I withdrew everything," Mike told him.

"That's good. It means the agents aren't throwing everything they have at us yet," Dustin explained. "They probably still want to keep this quiet."

"What are you talking about?" Mike asked.

"Thank about it," Dustin said. "They already know who we are. They've probably been watching all along. They could have frozen your bank account the minute they realized we'd gone on the run. They could have mobilized the entire Indiana state police force and set up roads blocks. They could have helicopters in the air searching. Since they haven't done any of that, it sounds to me like they want to keep this an internal issue for now. Whatever secret agency is after

us, they don't want to bring outsiders in on the secret. They'd rather catch us some place quiet with no witnesses around and make us disappear without a trace."

"How do you know any of that?" Mike asked.

"It just makes sense, doesn't it?" Dustin replied.

"Dustin," El interrupted them. She reached over his shoulder to point out the windshield. He followed her finger and saw only a mobile home off the side of the road. They were about a minute outside of town, now, and the homes were growing farther apart as the road stretched on into the countryside.

"Stop here," El said.

"What's here?" Dustin asked, slowing down and pulling into the dirt driveway.

"A car," El told them. "One that isn't marked."

Dustin's eyes roamed over the house and the family out front. They looked to be a husband and wife with a daughter who might have been about ten. The dad was fixing the tire on the little girl's pink bicycle. They didn't look like they had a lot of money, but they did have a car parked in the driveway. Dustin wasn't a big car guy, but it looked to be a couple of years older than his own. The family looked up at the intrusion into their peaceful evening. Dustin stopped the car and turned it off.

"Let me talk to them," El said.

Mike and Dustin both watched with baited breath as she slid out of the back seat, still carrying the baby, and approached the family.

"Buenos Dias," the dad said.

"Hello," El offered.

"No hablo ingles," he said, with a polite smile. "Lo siento."

Dustin frowned. He had only been able to pick out the word "ingles,"

but he wasn't very optimistic.

El shifted the baby in her arms and took a deep breath, bracing herself for failure. She wasn't confident in her Spanish, but she also wasn't terribly confident about leveling with strangers. She'd found that honesty didn't always get the response she hoped. Sometimes it scared people away.

"We're in trouble and we need help," she blurted out, hoping she'd used the right Spanish noun for trouble. There it was. She understood perfectly well that was no way to start a normal conversation, but as she looked at the man's face, and very gently into his mind, she felt reassured that he wasn't going to turn her away. She could have pretended they weren't running from agents, but it felt very good to be honest. If she was right about this person, it just might be alright.

He put down the bicycle tire and turned to share a look with his wife. She gave him a puzzled look, then he turned back to fix El with an equally puzzled and slightly alarmed look. She held her breath, waiting for him to answer. The longer she had to stare at him, her senses told her not to worry.

"What kind of trouble?" He asked her, still in Spanish.

She took one last deep breath before making the plunge. "Men from the government are chasing us," she told him. "We're trying to hide." She was pretty sure she'd conjugated "hide" wrong, but he must have understood.

His face grew a little more alarmed. "Why are they chasing you?"

She considered the real answer for a long minute before speaking. Why, truly, were the agents after her? Just because they enjoyed hurting people? She knew that wasn't true.

"They think we're dangerous," she told him at last.

The man's daughter had been inching closer all the time, and El didn't even need any special senses to know that the girl really wanted to look at baby Allie, but knew her father wouldn't let her get

too close to a stranger yet.

The man looked from El to the two faces in the car, and back to El. "Who are you?" he asked, now more puzzled than alarmed.

"I'm El," she told him. "This is Allie," she pointed toward the car, "and in there is my husband Mike and our friend Dustin." She realized she'd said "esposa" instead of "esposo" and had accidentally called Mike her wife, but the man didn't object to her poor fluency.

Dustin gave a shy wave from behind the steering wheel.

"Men from the government are chasing you?" The man repeated her words, as if expecting her to change her story.

She nodded. He might laugh at her. He might think she was making it up. He might think she was crazy. He might think she really was dangerous and tell her to go away. He might think she really was dangerous and call the police. But, if she was right about him, he wouldn't.

"You're in trouble," he said, instead of asked. "What do you need?"

"We need to buy a car," El told him. "One that isn't..." She didn't know if "Marked" was the same in Spanish, so she tried again. "They know our car. We need a different one so we can escape."

A few minutes later, the man, Jose, was insisting that they were all friends. He pulled Mike and Dustin out of the car and introduced them to his wife, whose name was Camila. Their daughter, whose name was Sofia, was practically bouncing up and down to get a chance to hold the little baby. El sent Allie an extra dose of mental calm to make sure she didn't mind being held. Lemonade was passed around, and Jose tried to teach Dustin how to say hello and goodbye in Spanish. El would have been happy to stay a little while. It was certainly more enjoyable than being on the road on the run. But she really didn't want to stay long enough to draw the agents to Jose's family's house and put them in danger. He seemed to understand that she and the others needed to get down to the business of running away, so he drew an end to all the pleasantries and handed over his car keys. Mike handed him a stack of cash, and Dustin surrendered

his own car keys with no apparent hesitation. El was a little worried that the agents might find Dustin's car and drag Jose in for interrogation, but he assured her that he knew how to "clean up" the car, so she took him at his word. He was already unscrewing the license plate from Dustin's car when El and the others drove off in what had been Jose's car.

In a car with no paper connection at all to any of them, with a license plate that Jose had assured her was clean, they headed North again for Chicago. El could easily feel that Dustin, and even Mike, were feeling better about their chances of escape now.

Hopper watched Sam's friend, Jessie, emerge from the police station and make her way across the street. She did a pretty good job of not looking suspicious as she casually moved in the direction of Sam's truck without looking like she was on a mission to bring them a stolen case file. She slid into the passenger seat next to Hopper. Since Sam's truck had no back seats, Hopper tried to sqeeze over as much as possible to Jessie wouldn't be crushed between him and the door. It was still a tight fit, so he apologized to her as he introduced himself.

"Thanks for getting this for me, Jessie," Sam said. "I can't... I really appreciate it."

"It's better if I don't show it to you here," she told him. "The chief's still mad at you. He wouldn't want to see me telling you anything."

Sam pulled out of the street parking and headed off at a leisurely speed.

"Wouldn't it be better if we look at it alone?" Jessie asked, then gave Hopper a quick apology.

"I need Hop to see this, too," Sam told her. "It's Ok. He was with me in Indianapolis years ago."

"I don't think anybody outside needs to see-"She said.

"He's helping me," Sam told her. "I really need his eyes on this."

She sighed. "You know what would really help you? If you let this crazy stuff go. Then the chief would bring you back in, and we wouldn't have to sneak around like this. What are you going to do with this anyway?" She waved the file at him.

"We're just looking into a theory," Sam said. "I promise, I'm not going off the tracks on this one. We're just shooting some ideas back and forth, me and Hop. Once I have everything figured out, I'll bring it to the chief. I won't do anything crazy, I promise."

Hopper winced, thinking of all the things they'd already done, but Jessie didn't need to know about that. Sam pulled into the parking lot of a Tim Hortons a few blocks from the police station, and they all got out and crowded around the hood of Sam's truck where Jessie laid the stolen file and flipped it open.

"This where Mark and Jeff were the day they died," she pointed to the address of an apartment complex on the North side of town. "You weren't here that day. I was down by 130th responding to a call at the time. Mark and Jeff were sent to notify the family about their daughter. Mr. and Mrs. Castillo, apartment 812. When they were there giving the bad news, a fire started in the apartment and they got caught up on the 8th floor. I guess the fire spread too quick and they couldn't make it out. It was a freak accident."

Sam was gazing down at the file with a dark look on his face, but Hopper reached a hand out for the file. Jessie slid the papers away from his hand and glanced toward Sam. Hopper let his hand drop, but asked her gently, "Tell me about the girl."

With another skeptical glance toward Sam, Jessie turned to another page in the file. "Maria Castillo. Her body was found outside of Ridgeway Elementary. An accidental death in a shootout between two street gangs."

Hopper put a hand over his face to cover his expression.

"Nortenas?" Sam asked.

"One of them was," she nodded.

"So the fire," Sam began slowly. "There wasn't anything weird about it?"

Jessie scowled at him.

"I'm not trying to convince you, I'm just asking," Sam said, holding his hands up defensively.

"The fire department called it a house fire," she told him. "Maybe somebody went to work and left their curling iron plugged in, or left a towel next to a hot burner."

"But it spread so fast Mark and Jeff couldn't get out?" Sam protested.

"So you think it was your magic fire that you keep talking about?" She said with a raised eyebrow.

"You'd believe me if you saw what I-"

"Sam, listen to me," she said. "You're upset about Mark and Jeff. We all are, but you can't-"

"That's not it," Sam protested, but she didn't let him interrupt.

"Sometimes cops die in car accidents, real accidents. Sometimes cops get caught in house fires. Sometimes firemen get caught in house fires. And sometimes little girls get shot walking out of school. It's hell, but it happens. You don't need to look for a reason behind it, or make one up."

"But what if there WAS a reason behind it?" Sam said, raising his voice. "What if it wasn't an accident? What if somebody wanted them dead? And nobody's looking into it?"

She shook her head in exasperation.

"What cases were they on at the time?" Sam pushed. "Maybe they were getting too close to somebody who didn't want to be found. Maybe it was an old case. Somebody they put in prison a long time ago who got out. Maybe-"

Hopper leaned in between them. "How many people died in the fire?"

He asked.

Jessie put a hold on her argument with Sam and flipped through the file. "Five," she told him impatiently, then turned her attention back to Sam. "You're trying to make this into a case when it's just an accident. Tragic. Horrible, but it's totally random. It could have been any two cops in that apartment that day. Or they might have gone an hour earlier and not been there when the fire started."

"If you were shot on duty, do you think I'd ever stop looking?" Sam argued. "Not until the person who did it was dead." Sam caught himself. "Or behind bars," he quickly amended.

"Can I?" Hopper asked, reaching again for the file. Jessie was too distracted to try and stop him.

"That's the difference," Jessie argued. "Nobody did this to them. It was a freak accident."

"You don't know that," Sam shot back.

"And what do you think it was?" She challenged him. "A guy who... makes fires?"

"Yes!" Sam snapped, not backing down.

"With his mind?" She asked.

"I've seen it!" Sam said. "It's real. He's real. He's out there blowing up buildings, killing people, killing cops, and everyone thinks I'm the crazy one."

"It wasn't them," Hopper interrupted.

Sam turned and stared at him.

"Nobody was trying to kill the two cops. It wasn't about them," Hopper said sadly, his face buried in the file.

Jessie suddenly realized he had it and snatched it back.

"What?" Sam asked Hopper. "Now all of a sudden you don't believe

me either?"

Before Hopper answered him, Jessie grabbed Sam's arm. When he flinched, she held it a little tighter. "Sam, I want you back on the Force," She said, more consoling than she had been before. "Let the chief see you aren't crazy and he'll bring you back. Treat this like what it is: a terrible accident. Mourn for Mark and Jeff – Cry for Mark and Jeff, if you want. I did. But don't go looking for things that aren't there. Show the chief you're ready, and get back to doing what you do best."

Sam didn't meet her eyes.

"Remember what we do every day," She told him. "It's enough to make anybody break. Maybe you need to talk to someone-"

"What I need is for people to believe me," Sam told her. He glanced over at Hopper, who decided it was best to wait until they were alone to tell Sam what he thought.

They took Jessie back to the police station. The ride was quiet and seemed way longer than it actually was. Jessie tried to console Sam again before she left, but he was already sinking into himself. When she closed the truck's door behind her, Hopper finally spoke up.

"It wasn't about those two cops," he told Sam.

"Hop, I don't need to hear it from you, too," Sam said, digging the heels of his hands into his eyes.

"It's about the little girl," Hopper said.

"What?"

"The little girl who got shot. Uh, Maria Castillo," Hopper said. "The cops were there to tell her parents she was dead. One of the bodies identified after the fire was her mother, Viviana Castillo. Then there were the two cops who died. They could have been sitting in her living room giving her the bad news when the fire started. That's three people."

"Three people... Ok," Sam said without recognition.

"Out of just five," Hopper explained. "Only five people died out... out of how many in that apartment complex? A few hundred? Most of the people made it out before the fire spread. Only five people didn't make it out, and THREE of those five were sitting in the same room."

Sam still didn't seem to be following.

"The fire started IN that room," Hopper insisted.

"Ok, maybe..." Sam allowed cautiously.

"And if both the mom and dad were home when the cops showed up, there should have been four people in the room," Hopper went on. "Why didn't the firefighters find the dad's body?"

Sam's eyes widened.

"What would you do if someone walked in and told you your little girl had just been killed by a street gang?" Hopper offered. "Maybe you'd put your fist through the drywall. But what if you weren't you? What if you had some ability the rest of us don't have?"

Sam jumped out of the cramped seat and started pacing the length of the truck. Hopper stepped out and stood next to the passenger door so Sam could still hear him.

"Maybe you were just a regular guy," he said from across the empty pickup bed. "You've got a weird power inside you, but you keep it under control. You go through your life, and nobody knows you're anything special. Then the worst thing you can think of happens to you, and your emotions take over, and in the moment, you lose control. What happens? Maybe you just explode. Maybe everything around you bursts into flame."

"So the little girl's dad is our arsonist?" Sam said, still pacing.

"It's a theory," Hopper said.

"And Mark and Jeff just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time." Sam thought out loud. He stopped pacing and looked across the truck at Hopper. "Then why all the other fires days later?"

Hopper took a long breath, his face sad. "Revenge?"He offered.

Sam raised his eyebrows.

"You know what I would have done, if Sarah's death had been somebody's fault?" He asked quietly. "If there was somebody I could blame, besides myself?"

"He's been going after Nortenas," Sam said, recognition finally spreading on his face.

Hopper nodded. "That's how it looks to me. I don't think it's enough to convince your chief, but maybe it's enough for us to find him."

Agent Jack Smith stalked away from the two rookie agents who had nearly gotten themselves killed, and who had been stupid enough to involve a county cop who was now a witness to unnatural things that they couldn't explain away and couldn't make him forget. Smith had thought about firing them on the spot, but he decided the blame lay with the person who'd assigned such green agents to a case this sensitive.

As if he'd just spoken the devil's name out loud, Smith's phone rang. He answered the secure line with the appropriate code word.

"This is Director Carver," the man's voice came over the phone, slightly distorted around the cigarette that Smith knew was perpetually in his mouth. "Update me."

"We're still looking," Smith said unhappily. "We have all the main roads covered, still nothing. We have a huge area to search, though. They could have gone literally anywhere. We're also checking the homes of known family and friends. I'll find them, don't worry."

"I'm not worried about that. I'm more worried about what will happen when you do find them."

"It won't be a problem," Smith said.

"And the incident earlier today?"

"Won't be repeated," Smith said, resisting the urge to blame the two green agents again. Whatever people under him did wrong, it was his responsibility.

"I want to make sure you're taking all the necessary precautions," Carver said. "If you really are dealing with a Pyrokete. Have you been keeping up with the events in Sacramento?"

"A little. I've been busy," Smith told him. "Is it a confirmed pyrokete we're dealing with over there, too?"

"All but confirmed," Carver said. "It's either that, or an arsonist with some new magic napalm that no one's ever seen before. We're seeing things being done with fire that we didn't know were possible until a few days ago."

Smith briefly daydreamed about running THAT investigation, but decided he'd much rather be here, assigned to the Wheeler family. At least they weren't actively nuking places wherever they went.

"I'm going to send you those files so you know what you could be dealing with," Carver said. "I don't want your whole team going up in a fireball. You need to be careful when you make your approach."

"I'm always careful," Smith said.

"I also called to tell you that we've lost track of 2785 again," Carver said. "He's gone completely off our radar. Who knows where he'll show up next."

"That's frightening," Smith said. "I'll keep an eye out."

"If your situation gets out of hand," Carver said, "it's only more likely that 2785 will be drawn to it."

"I'll make sure that doesn't happen," Smith said.

"I'm going to give you some more help," Carver told him. "I'm going to send you Walter."

"Wouldn't he be better used over in Sacramento?" Smith asked.

"As far as we know, there's only one active subject in that case," Carver said. "You're dealing with two."

"One is a baby," Smith reminded him.

"The moment you underestimate them, that's when people start getting killed." Carver growled.

"AND the Wheelers haven't shown any aggressive behaviors," Smith argued.

"Until now," Carver said.

"Until we provoked them," Smith pointed out.

"We don't always know what will trigger these types," Carver said. "Just make sure it stays clean and quiet, and I'll be happy. And use Walter. I'm not sending him there for you to waste him."

"Yes sir," Smith grumbled.

It was dark outside by the time Dustin and the others made it to Chicago, which he thought was all the better. There was less chance of them being seen when they exited the car that way, unless, he though with a sudden wave of extra nervousness, the agents were using night vision scopes.

Dustin had been to Will's house a few times, so he knew the way. He'd thought about calling to let Will know they were coming, but the agents might have been listening to the phones. So he just had to hope that Will was home and that he'd be happy to shelter fugitives. Dustin parked on the side of the road a block down from Will's house and began to get out.

"Stay here," he told the others.

"What are you doing?" Mike asked.

"I have to check the place out first," Dustin said, thinking that should have been obvious. "What if the agents guessed we'd come here and they're waiting inside with Will tied to chair?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Mike said.

"I'm just being smart," Dustin said. "If the agents are inside, then they'll only have me, and you two can escape. Actually, you might want to take the driver's seat, so if you do see them snatch me, you'll be ready to get away. Just watch me from here. If I wave my hand three times like this, that means it's all clear. If I only wave twice, that means the agents are inside and you should run. If I only wave once, that means the agents are trying to use me to draw you out, so don't follow, whatever you see or hear. Got it?"

"I don't think the agents knew we were coming here," Mike said.

"It's better to be safe," Dustin said, the headed off down the dark sidewalk. Will had moved to Chicago to go to school, and then stayed there when he'd landed a job with TSR. Dustin had been up to visit him a few times, but sadly they hadn't been able to spend the time together that they used to, now that they lived so far apart. He steeled himself as he knocked on the door. He hoped he wouldn't find a man in a suit with a gun opening the door. If the agents were inside, and they told Will at gun point to answer the door and invite his friends into a trap, Dustin was sure that Will would find some way to give a danger signal.

"Dustin, I had no idea you were coming," Will said in surprise as he opened the door.

"Will," Dustin said, fixing him with a very serious gaze. "Are you alone?"

"What?"

"Is there anyone... else in your house?" Dustin asked, keeping his distance from the doorway in case the agents jumped out to grab him.

"Uhh... is something wrong, Dustin?" Will asked.

"Nothings wrong. Everything's fine," Dustin said. "I was just... in town. So I stopped by to see my friend." He tried to crane his neck to see into the house. He didn't see any agents, but then, they would be

hiding, wouldn't they?

"Wanna come outside, buddy?" Dustin asked, "And take a short walk?"

"It's... kinda late, Dustin," Will said. "Wouldn't you rather just come in?"

"I'd rather take a walk outside and talk about... things," Dustin said, badly wanting to take Will's hand and pull him outside. If there were agents in the house and they were hoping to lure Dustin inside, he had to act natural if he was going to get Will outside and to safety.

Looking puzzled, Will came outside and shut his front door behind him. "Are you sure you're Ok?" He asked. "You're acting a little..."

"Come here old buddy," Dustin said in a loud voice, in case the agents were listening. He put an arm around Will's shoulder as they walked so he could lean in close and whisper. "Are the agents waiting inside?"

"What?!" Will asked.

"It's Ok, just act natural," Dustin told him. "Mike and El are waiting in the car. If there are agents, we can take you with us."

"Mike and El?" Will said, suddenly looking around.

"Shhh," Dustin warned him. "Don't give it away. Just give me a sign. If there are agents inside, just casually work the name of your favorite Brown Wizard into your next sentence." Dustin released his hold on Will and said in a loud voice again, "So how are things? What's new?"

"What do you mean, agents?" Will asked. "What's going on?"

Dustin was pretty convinced his friend really didn't know what he was talking about. "You're sure it's safe inside?" He asked. "You haven't seen anything weird lately? Like white repair vans parked outside your house? Have you heard any odd clicks or chirps when you pick up the phone?"

"Dustin, WHAT are you talking about? And where are Mike and El?"

"Right over here," Dustin said, fully convinced. "We're on the run."

"What?"

"From the agents?"

"What?"

"And we have the baby with us," Dustin explained. "She's the one the agents really want. You should know before you take us under your protection, she has superpowers that she can't control."

Will stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and gave him the most bizarre expression ever.

"Don't act so surprised," Dustin said. "You should have expected any baby of El's would be born with powers. The agents want baby Allie, probably to use as a weapon, and we've been on the run. We thought your house might be the safest place to hide."

"Wait, wait, wait," Will said. "The same agents from before?"

"Maybe," Dustin said. "Or different agents. Either way, we're running from the bad men and we need your help."

They'd reached the car by now, and Mike and El got out.

"Hi... guys," Will said, looking back and forth between them. "I'm glad to see all of you... but this sounds really weird."

"I'm so sorry to drag you into this," Mike said gravely. "If you don't want to get caught up in our problems, we won't stay."

"What? No," Will said. "I don't mean that. Come- come inside. You can stay as long as you need. But you're going to have to explain from the beginning, because I'm a little lost."

Sam hadn't wanted to go home that evening. He'd insisted on driving Hopper around to the apartment where the Castillo family had lived,

to the warehouse that had burned down, and all of the places their arsonist had hit. When they failed to find him simply standing on a street corner waiting for them to pick him up, Sam had wanted to drive around to a whole collection of places around Sacramento that he knew to be connected with the Nortena gang. Hopper had tried to gently remind him that it would be next to impossible to predict where the arsonist would hit next, but Sam seemed to feel that going home and trying again tomorrow would be like admitting defeat, so he continued to drive around town, listening to the police radio the whole time, ready to jump at any mention of a fire.

In the end, Sam had succumbed to sleep. With the truck parked outside of a library, he now sat with his head slumped forward against the steering wheel, which Hopper was actually glad to see, since he was pretty sure his friend hadn't slept more than a few hours since this whole arsonist problem had started. He'd turned down the volume on the radio so it wouldn't wake Sam, but kept an ear out, just in case.

The sun was starting to go down behind the library. Hopper squinted into the bright orange light as it sank lower and lower, marking the end of yet another day he'd spent in California with Sam instead of in Hawkins with Joyce. He'd called her a few times already, but he kept getting the answering machine. Between their constant searching for the Arsonist, the time zone difference, and her work hours, he'd only been able to leave messages. He felt a little bad, but knew she'd understand. He'd warned her before he left for California that he had no idea what he'd be getting into, though Hopper had expected something a little less super natural. Still, he guessed that Joyce would be getting pretty bored by now, with no one to talk to in the house. He wondered if she'd drive up to visit Will in Chicago, since he lived closer than Johnathan. It had taken Joyce some time to adjust to the quiet once both boys had moved out of the house. His mustache lifted in a very small, fond smile as his thoughts drifted toward Will.

Hopper straightened in his seat, his ears picking out the quiet and distorted voice of the police dispatcher as clear as day. Fire!

He slapped Sam's arm.

"Wake up," Hopper said. "Sam, there's a fire. Just came over the radio."

Sam snapped awake, his hand scrambling at the key in the ignition.

"23rd Avenue and... and..." Hopper paused to listen to the radio, hoping they'd repeat the address. He didn't know the city like Sam did.

"Roosevelt," Sam guessed, throwing the truck in gear and backing out of the parking space. "There's some abandoned housing projects there." He pulled out onto the road, cutting off a bus, and turned at the next light. "A lot of illegal stuff happens there," he explained. "The city's talked about demolishing them for years, but they've never gotten around to it."

The dark and mostly quiet sidewalks and store fronts sped by them as Sam impatiently negotiated the streets of Sacramento. Hopper realized he was clenching his jaw in anticipation of what they might find when they reached the burning building.

"Remember the plan," Hopper said gently. "If we find our Arsonist, let me do the talking. Don't get too close, and don't act like a cop. We're on the same page here, right?"

The other man didn't answer as he sped around a little blue car that was in his way.

"Sam?" Hopper said, a little more forcefully.

He still didn't answer, his eyes still locked on the road ahead.

"I need to hear you say it," Hopper insisted. "We're on the same page, right?"

"Yes," Sam snapped. "I'll let you make the first move. I'll keep my distance, but only for so long. If you can't talk him down... I'm not losing him, Hop. I'm not."

"Just don't do anything stupid," Hopper said. "This is dangerous. If we can't bring him in safely, it's better to let him go and try again."

"No, it's not," Sam argued.

"If we try to force things," Hopper said, "It could go real bad real fast. We've talked about this."

"I said I'd let you make the first move," Sam told him. "If he listens to you, great. If he wants to turn himself in, great. But if we have him, I'm not letting him get away. I'm not."

Hopper took a deep breath, partly to keep calm, partly to prepare to carry on the argument, but an orange glow in the distance drew his attention. He'd been so focused on Sam and his dangerous obsession that his ears had been shutting out the chatter on the police radio. Now his attention shifted back, and the barrage of voices washed over him. The dispatchers and the fire trucks and the cops were going crazy, shouting about the fire, breaking radio protocols, and betraying their own obvious panic. As Sam's truck drew nearer, Hopper could see why. The building was blazing away like a nuclear furnace. Flames climbed as high as a ten story building into the otherwise black night sky.

Fire trucks and squad cars were already trying to set up a perimeter, their own flashing lights all but drowned out by the much brighter orange flames. Sam slowed, but didn't stop, and rolled right past a pair of squad cars.

"Sam," Hopper warned, but the other didn't answer. Sam brought the truck to a stop well inside the half-established perimeter. Four cops poured out of their squad cars and ran toward the little pickup truck that wasn't supposed to be there. Hopper guessed that they recognized Sam, because they were ONLY shouting at him and hadn't drawn their guns. Sam, though, ignored them. She stood next to his truck with one hand still on the open door, desperately scouring the area for any sign of their elusive Arsonist. Hopper followed his gaze, but saw no one except for the other cops and the fire fighters.

"You can't be here, Sam," the nearest of the cops shouted as he approached.

"Hey! Listen, you guys don't understand what you're dealing with," Sam protested. Hopper's gaze fell back on the burning building. It

was going up fast, even faster than the last one, and there was no sign of their Arsonist. Either he had already run off after starting the fire, or he was inside. Hopper didn't like their odds. If the guy was inside, he'd have no reason to come out, and they didn't have long before the cops would force him and Sam to leave.

Tearing his gaze away from the fire, he came around the truck to where Sam was standing, locked in his argument with all four of the other cops. They seemed to be doing their best to reason with him instead of physically removing him from where he wasn't supposed to be. Hopper wondered how long that would last. With one last glance back at the fire, he came to a decision.

Taking off his hat, he thrust it into Sam's distracted hands.

"Hold this," Hopper told him. Sam turned his attention away from the other cops to look first at the hat, then at Hopper.

"What-"

"And these," Hopper cut him off, fishing his lighter and pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. He didn't want to lose those, either. Slapping them into Sam's hand, Hopper turned and jogged toward the fire.

Sam shouted in confusion at his back, but Hopper didn't slow down. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to muster the courage and the crazy to keep going if he stopped. The heat began to press back at him like a strong wind as he approached the building. The fire was so bright he had to squint.

He paused in front of a door that wasn't completely engulfed in flames. Hopper knew better than to touch the metal knob, which would have taken all the skin off his hand. With one last second of hesitation before the point of no return, he kicked the door open. The inside of the building looked as terrifying as he'd imagined.

Sam, and now the other cops, were all shouting at his back, but Hopper didn't turn to look at them. If he wasted any more time, there might not be much of the building left standing. Holding up one arm to shield his eyes and face, he jumped into the fire.

5. Chapter 5

Firebaby

Chapter 5

"And you don't think the agents followed you here?" Will asked.

"I don't think so," Dustin told him. "We picked up an unmarked car, so they shouldn't be able to track us. We haven't seen any sign of them since we left Hawkins. We wouldn't have come here if they were hot on our tails. That would put you in too much danger."

"I mean, I'm not so worried about me," Will said. "Just wondering if we should keep a lookout or anything."

"I'm pretty sure they didn't follow us," Dustin said. "If they know we're here, they'd have tossed smoke grenades through your windows and kicked down the front door already."

"That's a pleasant image," Mike grumbled. He sat on Will's couch next to El and Allie, while Will and Dustin sat on chairs they'd brought in from the kitchen. Will, trying to be a good host on such short notice, had cooked them all Hot Pockets. Mike's Hot Pocket still lay untouched on his plate.

"And, sorry Mike, but I just want to make sure I understand..." Will said gently. "Allie..." He seemed to be trying very hard to choose his words so as not to bother Mike, so Dustin stepped in to supply the necessary information and save Will the discomfort of stepping on Mike's toes.

"She's a Pyrokete," Dustin explained. "Pyrokinetic powers. She can create and manipulate fire."

"Like Human Torch, Johnny Storm?" Will offered, a gleam in his eye. He caught himself and glanced sideways at Mike. A little sheepishly, he said "I mean-"

"Exactly like that," Dustin confirmed, pulling Will's attention back from Mike. "The only thing is, she can't control it. She's too young."

"Wow," Will said. Dustin looked over at Mike, whose eyes were cast unhappily down at his uneaten Hot Pocket, still clearly feeling the full weight of the situation pressing on his shoulders.

"So we need to take a few precautions," Dustin continued, bringing Will up to speed as quickly as he could. "Fire extinguishers in every room. At least two in whichever room Allie sleeps in, since that seems to be when she's most likely to start a fire, in her sleep. Do you keep up the batteries in your smoke detectors? Never mind. El's the only smoke detector we need. How about this house? Did it pass inspection for fire safety standards when you bought it?"

"Uhh, I think so," Will said.

"Really that's all we can do," Dustin told him. "El seems to be able to keep the baby calm and happy whenever she's awake. I think the only danger is when she has a nightmare."

"And that's what happened to your house?" Will asked Mike quietly.

Mike nodded his head sadly without looking up.

"But that was before El knew just HOW powerful Allie's abilities are," Dustin told Will. "She's been on high alert ever since, so the danger is probably a lot less now."

"Wow," Will said again. "No wonder the government wants her."

"Right, and she's still only a baby," Dustin said. "Just think what she'll be able to do once her powers are fully grown." For a brief moment, the two friends shared a look of pure wonder as their imaginations ran in the same direction, but Will broke eye contact and let the moment end, probably out of respect for Mike, Dustin thought.

"So I don't mean this the wrong way," Will said, changing the subject, "Because I want you guys to stay here as long as you need, as long as it takes until you're all safe. But... How long...

"How long will the agents keep looking for Allie?" Dustin finished for him. "That's the real question, isn't it? I don't know the answer. I was hoping we could brain storm. I don't think they'll just get tired of looking and give up. We need to find a solution, so that Mike and El

don't have to live in hiding for the rest of their lives."

"Hmm," Will said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"Tell me your ideas," Dustin insisted. "We need all the brainpower we can put together."

"Well, what worked last time?" Will thought out loud. "Why did the agents stop looking for you and El when we were kids?"

"Because the Demogorgon ate Dr. Brenner and his men," Dustin said, unnecessarily. Though Will hadn't seen that happen with his own eyes like Dustin had, he'd certainly heard the story a million times in the years after the actual events.

"You're right," Will said. "We can't hope for that to happen again." He wrinkled his forehead in thought. "I wonder how high this goes. I mean, Hawkins Lab has been shut down for years. So these people aren't a part of that crew. Who are these agents? CIA? NSA? Is the whole government in on it?"

"I doubt it," Dustin said. "The more people that know about a thing, the harder it is to keep quiet. I don't think the president knows, for example. Or congress. There are hundreds of them. You'd think at least one of them would have a conscience and come clean to the American people that super heroes are real, and aliens landed at Roswell, and the Montauk Project really happened. No, I think this is just a single agency or department. Maybe they get their regular funding from the government, but they cover up what those funds are used for. And if they can produce some kind of results, like new weapons to use against the Commies, the rest of the government knows better than to ask where they came from."

"But we aren't at war with the Commies anymore," Will pointed out.

Dustin shrugged. "I guess there'll be other wars."

"What if we..." Will began, then gave up.

"We're brainstorming here, Will," Dustin told him. "There are no bad ideas. Come on. Out with it."

"Fake identities?" Will asked shyly.

"Do you know anyone who can forge birth certificates and passports?" Dustin asked honestly.

"No."

"We'll put that down as a maybe. What else have you got?" Dustin asked.

"What if we smuggle them across the border?" Will asked. "We could hide out in Canada."

"Mike hates Canada, remember?" Dustin said.

"Mexico, then," Will tried.

"Hmm. We'll put that down as another maybe," Dustin said. "Ideally, we want to find a way to make things go back to normal. Mike likes teaching at Hawkins Middle, and Allie deserves the chance to grow up surrounded by all her family and friends. If they have to go into exile and change their identities..."

"What about black mail?" Will offered.

"Keep talking," Dustin said.

"We tell the government that we'll expose them," Will said. "We'll go public with everything that happened when we were kids, unless they leave Allie alone."

"It could work," Dustin said. "Those secrets are ten years old. Not as juicy as they'd be if they were fresh, but it could work."

"We'd need to figure out WHO to contact with our demands, though," Will said.

"So it's another maybe," Dustin summed up. "That's three so far. I like this. We're making progress. What else have you got?"

"I just... I just wish we knew more," Will said in exasperation. "If we knew exactly who the agents work for, and how high up the chain

this conspiracy goes... I think we need to call in help on this one."

Dustin raised his eyebrows in question.

"I bet Lucas could tell us more," Will said, a sudden note of hope in his voice.

"Why didn't I think of that," Dustin said, smacking a palm against his forehead.

"Are you sure we can trust him?" Mike said from the couch.

"Mike, are you crazy?" Dustin asked. "It's Lucas."

"I don't know," Mike said. "He went into Army Intelligence. Maybe he's on their side, now."

"I'm gonna pretend you didn't say that," Dustin told him, purposely turning his head and shoulders back toward Will and away from Mike.

"Besides, he's out now," Will said. "A few months ago. And it's great that he was on the inside. He'll know how they think."

"Brilliant," Dustin proclaimed. "That's our move. Let's call him up right now. Wait... We can't say any of this over the phone."

"The agents might be listening," Will agreed.

"Exactly," Dustin said. "They don't even need to put a bug in your phone these days. They can just tap into the line from anywhere."

"So no phones," Will said sadly.

"Maybe not," Dustin said. "Assuming the agents don't know that we're here, then as long as you don't mention anything to Lucas about us, we should fly right under their radar. Can you get the message across to him without giving anything away?"

"I think so."

"That's Will the Wise talking, right there," Dustin said proudly. "I

knew we came to the right person."

Will glanced down at the floor, trying to hide his beaming smile.

"It's late, maybe we shouldn't bother him tonight," Mike said.

Dustin looked over at him. If his friend was going to let doubt and worry paralyze him, then Dustin would have to take charge of the situation, for his own good.

"This could be life or death. I think Lucas will forgive us for disturbing his evening," Dustin said. He glanced from Mike to El, who sat next to him on the couch. To all outside appearances, she wasn't paying attention to them and was preoccupied with talking to the baby, and also "talking" to the baby without words. Dustin knew better, though. He didn't need to ask what she thought about their plans. He'd been her friend long enough to know she was always paying attention to what went on in a room, even if it looked like she wasn't, and if she'd wanted to contribute something to their deliberations, she would have. Since she hadn't said anything when he and Will had agreed to call Lucas, Dustin knew she was on board with the idea.

"Let's call him tonight, then," Dustin reaffirmed, looking from Mike to Will. "First, I'm still a little hungry. Can you show me what you have in the fridge?" Before Will could ask any questions, Dustin pulled him into the kitchen where they could talk alone. "I need you to help me with something else," Dustin told him in a low voice. "This is Operation: Fix Broken Mike."

Will gave him a very confused look.

"They guy is turning into a boring adult," Dustin said, still keeping his voice down. "He probably spends more time worrying about saving for retirement than he does wondering if they'll ever make a third Terminator movie. I mean, just look at him."

Will leaned toward the kitchen door way and craned his neck, but Dustin pulled him back.

"Don't ACTUALLY look at him," Dustin hissed, fighting to keep from

being overheard. "I just mean, look at him. This is hitting him way harder than it should. He can't deal with the pressure, because he's lost touch with his sense of adventure. Do you realize he hasn't played D&D since Allie was born?" Dustin paused to let the weight of that sink in to Will. "I mean, he's probably going to buy Allie cabbage patch dolls for her next birthday instead of a plastic Millennium Falcon. He's going to be so regular we won't even recognize him. If we don't do something, he's going to turn into his dad."

Will grimaced at the thought. "What do we do?" he asked.

"I don't know yet," Dustin said. "Mike's going through a lot right now, so we can't be too rough on him, but we need to do something before we lose him. This is a job for Will the Wise. Let me know what you come up with."

The air was so hot that Hopper could barely breathe. Each lungful of air felt like gulping down coffee fresh off the burner. Huge chunks of the building were already gone, so that he might look through a doorway and find a cavernous space where several internal walls had burned to nothing. He wasn't sure how to find their Arsonist inside the inferno, but he hoped the Arsonist would find him if he bumbled around long enough in the rapidly collapsing housing project. He kept one arm in front of his face, and tried to breathe through his sleeve as much as he could. He'd begun to sweat even before going into the building, but the air was so hot and dry it just sucked the moisture right off his skin.

A single, wordless shout pierced through the crackle-roar of the fire. Hopper turned to look, his heart racing. Across a wide open space that the fire had cleared out, a lone man stood among the flames. Hopper tried to take a few steps toward him, but the half-burned floor boards creaked menacingly, and he drew back.

The man was almost impossible to make out, barely more than a silhouette visible through the dancing flames that surrounded him. He reached out a hand and, incredibly, the fire moved away from Hopper. As if he stood in the eye of a terrible storm, the flames spun and leaped away from him in all directions, until he was at the center of a circle of calm. For a dozen feet in each direction Hopper saw

charred, but not burning, floor boards and crumbling, but still not burning, drywall. Mercifully, he could breathe again. He felt as though the whole building could burn down around him, and he would be safe and unhurt in his little circle of calm.

"What are you doing here?" The semi-visible man shouted from across the way. The flames around him were so bright it was hard to look directly at him. When Hopper didn't answer, the man spoke again. "I'll make a path for you," he said impatiently. "That way, go! You can get outside. There are firemen out there. They'll take care of you."

True to his word, on the left hand side of Hopper's fire-free circle, a little corridor opened up, easily wide enough for him to walk through, and wonderfully free of the leaping flames.

"Go!" The man shouted again, when Hopper didn't move. "Hurry!"

"I'd rather stay," Hopper told him.

"What?" Came the reply, sounding completely caught off guard.

"I've been looking for you, actually," Hopper said.

"Go, before I change my mind," the Arsonist said.

"No thanks," Hopper told him. "You weren't easy to find. Now that I'm here, I really want to talk."

The silhouette turned it's back to Hopper. "This whole place is going to come crashing down in about ten minutes," he told Hopper. "Get out while you can." He took a single step away.

"Hey!" Hopper shouted at him, taking a single step of his own toward the other man. The weakened floor boards creaked under his weight. The Arsonist did stop, though he didn't turn around. "I want to help you," he called across the distance. "I've been following you for a while now. I think I know your name, and I might even know why you're doing all of this. And I just want to help you. I don't want to see this end badly for anyone."

"There's your way out," the Arsonist told him coldly. "I won't keep it open forever. Go." He started to move away again.

Again, Hopper shouted at him and moved closer. A floor board actually snapped, and splintered wood scraped little bloody lines across his ankle as one foot fell through the floor. Hopper pulled himself back to safety, never taking his eyes off the dark silhouette in the dancing inferno.

The man actually did turn around, then. He moved a little closer to Hopper and some of the obscuring flames slide aside like a curtain. He stared at Hopper with a mixture of curiosity and disbelief. Hopper stared back. It was indeed the same face he'd seen in that police case file.

"You're Francisco Castillo," Hopper told him. "You used to live in the Brushwood complex, apartment number 141B."

The man's face darkened at those words.

"I'm not with the SPD, but I know there were two cops there the day your place burned down, I know why they were there."

The man's eyes flashed, and the fire all around grew, blazing brighter and hotter for a single heartbeat. Hopper flinched, but his own personal bubble of safety hadn't collapsed. He held his breath as he listened to parts of the building break off and crumble in response to the brief surge. Tensing every muscle in his body, he pressed on.

"I've seen what you can do," Hopper told him. "I'll be honest, it scares me. But I know you can't keep doing it forever. So maybe you're only killing some pretty bad people. Maybe they deserve it, I don't know. But I don't think that's who you are."

Even though Hopper could at least see the man's face, he had no idea if his words were getting through. The fire certainly wasn't dying down, and if it wasn't for his little bubble of safety, he'd be long dead by now.

"I don't think you're a killer," Hopper went on. "Maybe you can do it if you tell yourself these people deserved to die. Maybe they did, maybe not. I don't think you can keep that up. Pretty soon you'll think about everything you've done. It'll hit you, that maybe some of the people you killed didn't deserve it. Maybe none of them did.

Maybe no one ever does. And I think, when that hits you, it'll eat you inside. You won't be able to live with it. Maybe, if you stop now, it doesn't have to end that way." His voice had grown a whole lot softer as he spoke, losing all of its edge. He wasn't sure if he'd pegged this guy. Maybe the man did have a heart, or maybe he was an uncaring killer. Hopper wanted to believe. He knew he was taking a big risk, but he so wanted to believe.

The Arsonist, the man named Francisco Castillo, shook his head slowly. "Whoever you are," he growled, "You think you know." He spat the words as if they were fire themselves. One last time he turned around and walked away. "You don't."

"I won't let you go that easy," Hopper called after him. "Either you kill innocent people, or you don't. No more lying to yourself." With one last wince as every instinct in his body told him not to, he ran across the burning floor that separated them.

"Joyce," he whispered to himself. "If I'm wrong about this, I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

As he'd expected, the fire-weakened floor boards splintered under his boots. The floor fell away and Hopper dropped like a stone. Castillo's head snapped around to look over his shoulder at the noise, but that was all Hopped could see before he fell through. The fire was even worse on the floor beneath him. During his split second of free fall, Hopper could see the bright, dancing flames reaching up toward him. The unbearable heat wrapped him up like a blanket. His stomach flipped as he tumbled, and the flames reached up, ready to swallow him.

"I'm sorry. I was wrong," he said.

The ground hit him like a truck.

Pain shot up and down his spine, and he wondered if it had snapped. The air went out of his lungs, and he tried to suck in a breath, just a single breath, but couldn't. His vision turned black and then began to fill with bright, dancing stars.

But he wasn't on fire.

Again Hopper tried to draw in air, but he couldn't. He tried to moan in pain, but couldn't do that either. He blinked his eyes, but the stars wouldn't go away.

But he wasn't burning.

As if from a hundred miles away, Hopper heard a voice shout "What is wrong with you?!"

Finally his lungs came back to life, and Hopper gasped and wheezed in a voice like an old, dying frog. He tried to roll onto his side, but every muscle in his body screamed in protest. He seemed to have landed flat on his back, and the concrete floor had proven itself to be far tougher than he was. He'd fallen and had the wind knocked out of him before, but this one took the cake.

His vision finally cleared enough that he could see the other man's face swim into view. He seemed to be kneeling over Hopper and staring down at him.

"Why would you do that?" He demanded.

To Hopper's relief, there wasn't a single flame to be seen on the floor where he painfully lay, or anywhere nearby. His Arsonist had been fast enough to put out the fire that he'd been about to drop into. All of it. Impressive. He could still see fire up above him. Lying on his back and unable to look anywhere but straight up, he could see the hole he'd fallen through. It was at least three stories up. He hadn't counted on that. He'd banked on falling eight or ten feet at most, not thirty. That explained the pain.

Hopper again tried to roll onto his side, grunt-moaning as his body begged him not to do it.

"Why?" The other man demanded again.

"Because I," Hopper croaked, then ran out of air. He needed to draw another whole lungful before he could continue. "Didn't want you," Again he had to stop for more air. "To turn into somebody you," He took another ragged breath. "Hate."

After a few more breaths, he tried for a whole sentence. "If you do

too much, you can't live with yourself after a while."

The man continued to stare down at him without words as he recovered.

"I don't want you to go there," Hopper said, when he felt strong enough. "You don't come back from there."

"Who ARE you?" The other asked.

"Name's Jim Hopper," he said slowly. The other man tried to help him sit up, and Hopper winced. "Not too fast." He looked slowly, very slowly, around the basement, or ground floor, or wherever he'd fallen to. "Can you get us out of here?"

"I can't fly," the other told him. "But the stairs might not have completely burned up."

"Hmm," Hopper said unhappily. "What if the whole building falls on us first?"

The other man looked up through the Hopper-sized hole, then held his hands over his head, and closed both fists. The flickering orange light that was so far above them instantly went out.

"It's that easy?" Hopper asked him.

"For me, it is," he said.

"Francisco, can I call you Franc? It's shorter. Listen, when we go outside, some of those cops are gonna be a little trigger happy, so stick close to me. Let me do the talking, Ok?" He mentally crossed his fingers. "Franc" hadn't actually said that he was willing to give himself up. Hopper hoped he could just sort of guide him into it. He tried to draw his knees under him and stand.

"Actually, I lied," Hopper told him. "I only said that cause I wanted you to help carry me. I don't think I can walk on my own yet."

Lucas froze in mid step on his way through Will's front door. Dustin jumped up from the couch, where he'd been sitting next to Mike and

El, and bounded toward his old friend.

"Uhh... hi... guys..." Lucas said, his gaze slowly falling on each person in turn. "Will, you didn't tell me you had everyone here."

"We couldn't risk it," Dustin told him. "Talking over an open phone line isn't safe, so Will had to lure you here under false pretext."

"What do you mean it isn't safe? Hi Dustin, by the way. Good to see you. What do you mean it isn't safe?"

Dustin pulled Lucas the rest of the way through the door and shut it behind them. "Don't stand out in plain view," Dustin told him. "Just in case they're watching."

"Whose watching?" Lucas asked, a very confused expression on his face. He looked back over at Mike and El. "Mike, it's been a long time. El... What's going on?"

"There's a lot we need to catch you up on," Dustin said, steering Lucas toward a chair. "So listen carefully. Mike and El are on the run from agents. They're fugitives. Will and I are protecting them, and we need your help."

"Hold on," Lucas said, pulling out of Dustin's grasp. "Agents? What are you talking about?"

"We escaped from Hawkins yesterday," Dustin explained. "Barely escaped. With our lives. It was pretty intense."

"I'm confused," Lucas said, looking to Will and the others for help. "Is this for real? This sounds serious."

"It is serious," Dustin said, placing himself right in front of Lucas again to hold his attention. "I need you to catch up to where we are. Mike and El are on the run from agents. We're hiding. We need your help."

"Ok, Dustin, listen to me," Lucas said, pulling his friend into one of the living room chairs. He pulled a chair directly in front and sat and leaned all the way forward toward Dustin. "I don't know what you saw, you'll have to explain that to me. But, whatever it was, it's

wasn't agents from Hawkins Lab. That place has been shut down for years."

"I know what I saw," Dustin began, but Lucas interrupted him.

"That Doctor Brenner and the people who worked there are dead," Lucas said firmly. "Most of them, anyway, and a few of them are in jail right now. Understand? I looked into this. Hawkins Lab wasn't a big government conspiracy. It was basically a tiny operation gone rogue. The program was supposed to have been shut down years before, and Dr. Brenner kept it running in secret." He glanced over to El with a little apologetic look and then turned back to Dustin. "They misappropriated funds, cut corners wherever they could, lied about what they were doing... The whole operation, everything that went on inside the Lab, the rest of the government didn't know about it. Like I told you, I looked into this."

"If you say so," Dustin argued. "Then this is somebody else. I don't know who it is, but they're some kind of agents and they're after us."

"Some kind of agents?"

"Black suits," Dustin said. "Black cars. Black sunglasses. Guns."

"And they... chased you?" Lucas said skeptically.

"Yup," Dustin told him.

"And they want to take El back to the lab again?" He said, looking over at her with a now worried expression.

"Actually, that's not it," Dustin began.

"Listen, you need to understand how this works," Lucas said, looking back to Dustin. "I worked in intelligence."

"I know," Dustin snapped. "That's why we called you."

"And it doesn't work like that," Lucas continued uninterrupted. "I helped decrypt Russian messages. I studied satellite photos that could see into Saddam Hussein's bathroom window. We kept track of Chinese nuclear submarines. Did you know the Chinese have nuclear

submarines now? And I never saw anything like Hawkins Lab. The government just doesn't do things like that anymore. They're actually... kind of boring. They worry about the tiniest little things. They'll spend a billion dollars trying to slip a bug into Fidel Castro's private phone, only to find out that he mostly just uses the phone to call his personal chef. They just don't have labs where they experiment on kidnapped kids anymore. That's a thing of the past." He turned to look at El again. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to sound-"

"Then I don't know who they are, but they're real," Dustin argued. "You figure out who they are. I'm just telling you what's happened so far."

El slid off the couch and crossed the living room where Lucas was sitting, baby Allie held in one arm. She crouched down so her eyes were level with Lucas. "It's true," she told him quietly. "I promise."

Lucas stared into her eyes for a long time. Dustin watch his face closely as his expression changed from hard skepticism to curiosity to acceptance.

"Ok," Lucas said at last, slumping back against the chair. "I believe you, but I still don't understand what's going on here. So... these people... chased you out of Hawkins?"

El nodded once.

Dustin nodded way more emphatically. "And we came to Will's house to hide. So now I need you to tell us who they are and help us come up with a solution"

Lucas pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, and let out a long breath, thinking. "What did they look like?" He asked Dustin.

"Black suits. Black sun gla-"

"I got that part. When did you see them first?"

"I caught them spying on my house," Dustin told him.

"You caught them?"

"I saw them. In the act," Dustin said.

"Then they can't have been very good spies," Lucas said.

"It's not like they were parked right in front of my house," Dustin said. "I had to do a little bit of detective work."

"Then what?"

"Then I told Mike and El that we needed to run, so we all got in the car. On our way out of Hawkins, a county cop pulled us over."

"And you think he was working with the agents?" Lucas asked, sounding only a bit less skeptical.

"Well, maybe. He might have been. But I was speeding, so..."

"Then what?"

"Then the agents showed up," Dustin continued. "They parked behind the county cop. They told him to arrest us, and-"

"Really?" Lucas asked in surprise.

"Probably," Dustin said. "He told us to get out of the car. He had a hand on his gun and that's when-" Dustin looked over at El, who had returned to the couch next to Mike. With a proud smile, Dustin said, "Then El saved us from the agents. She tossed them across the road, smashed their cars, and-"

"What?!" Lucas said, jumping out of his chair.

"Yeah, pretty awesome, isn't it?" Dustin said.

"Oh, this is bad," Lucas said, beginning to pace through the living room.

"I know it is," Dustin said. "That's why we're hiding from the agents."

"No, I mean really bad," Lucas told him. "Not like: a few people who work at Hawkins Lab are chasing you, bad. I mean like: you could go to jail for actual crimes, bad. Attacking anyone from law

enforcement, cops, FBI, CIA, anyone. That's a federal crime. They don't have to be rogue agents working in secret to get you. They could just be regular FBI agents, and now they have an actual reason they could put you all in jail. Oh, this is bad."

"What were we supposed to do?" Dustin demanded. "Let them take us away to some secret facility where we'd disappear forever?"

"How do you know that's what they wanted to do?" Lucas asked him. "Maybe they just wanted to ask you some questions."

"Right, that's why they sent men with guns. To 'talk' to us," Dustin said.

"ALL agents have guns," Lucas said. "It's part of the job."

"Besides, I'm pretty sure I know what they wanted," Dustin added. He glanced over at Mike and El. "Guys, can I tell him now? I really need to tell him."

El nodded her head, but Will got the jump on Dustin.

"Little Allie has super powers," Will said, the same note of excitement in his voice that Dustin would have had. He really wished he could have been the one to say it. It was just such an awesome thing thing to be able to say. How many people ever got to say words like that in their lifetime?

Lucas stared from El, to Mike, to the baby, back to Mike, then back to El.

"She's a pyrokete," Dustin said, his voice full of pride.

"A pyro...?"

"Kete," Dustin finished. She has pyrokinesis. She can make and control fire with her mind."

"Except she's too young to control it," Will interjected, clearly loving it just as much as Dustin was.

"Right, she's too young," Dustin continued. "And she had a nightmare,

and started a fire, and burned down Mike and El's house."

Lucas' eye went wide with surprise. "Are guys alright?" He asked Mike and El.

"Of course they are," Dustin said. "They're sitting right here. Do they look hurt to you? Anyway, that's why the agents are after baby Allie, I'm thinking. They never knew she had powers before. But now the secret's out, and they want her for their experiments."

Lucas continued to pace around the living room. He tried to start speaking several times, then stopped and resumed his pacing.

"Ok, we need more information if we're going to figure this out," Lucas said at last. "You're sure no one knows you're here, at Will's house?"

"Pretty sure," Dustin said. "We came in an unmarked car."

"Unmarked?"

"Come on Lucas, unmarked," Dustin said. "It means a car they don't know they should be tracking. It's a word spies use all the time."

"No, it isn't," Lucas said.

"After we escaped from those agents," Dustin continued, "We ditched that car a found a new one. We bought it from a nice Mexican family. El helped us out with that, too."

"We need to do some reconnaissance," Lucas said. "If they don't know you're here, they'll probably still be looking in Hawkins. Maybe they still have your house staked out. Or Mike's parents house, for example. They'd keep eyes on the places that you're most likely to return to. I'll go take a look. If I see them there, maybe I can get an idea of who they are."

"Great," Dustin said. "I'll come with you."

"They aren't looking for me," Lucas said. "Nobody will care if they see me driving through Hawkins. It'd be better if you stay here, out of sight."

"You're going to need a second pair of eyes," Dustin insisted. "And a second pair of hands. I'm coming."

"If I need anyone, it'd be El," Lucas said. "Flipping cars is a pretty useful weapon to have in your arsenal."

"Can't. El needs to stay here with the baby," Dustin explained. "She keeps her calm. If Allie gets upset, she might... you know. Burn stuff again. Besides, I know the lay of the land. You haven't been in Hawkins since you joined the Army."

"It can't have changed that much," Lucas argued.

"You need me, end of discussion," Dustin said. "Grab some snacks. We're going. Will, Mike, El, I'm sorry but I'm taking Lucas. You guys can catch up on lost time when we get back. We'll give you a situation report as soon as we've scouted Hawkins."

"Reconned," Lucas said.

"What?"

"As soon as we've reconned Hawkins." Lucas corrected.

"Whatever, let's go," Dustin said. "No time to waste."

"Just a minute," Lucas told him. He crossed the room again and sat on Will's coffee table, right in front of Mike and El. "Guys, uhh, this is a little crazy. I'm sorry this is how we get back together. I'm sorry we haven't really talked in a few years."

"It's my fault," Mike offered. "You were off doing important things. I should have been the one to call you."

"Some of the things were important," Lucas admitted. "Some of them were boring. I was stationed in Fort Knox, in Germany, in Okinawa, in Guantanamo Bay-"

"Where's that?" Dustin asked from behind him.

"Never mind," Lucas said quickly. "The point is, I'm here now. We have a lot to catch up on when I get back. I've missed you two. And

I've never even seen the baby. Will's told me about her. Except for the fire stuff. I never knew that."

"I never knew that, either," Will added.

"Listen," Mike said, searching for words. "I shouldn't be asking you to put yourself in danger. If the agents see you with us, they'll come after you too, maybe your family-"

"Stop," Lucas said gently. "I love you guys. If you're in danger, I'm here. No questions. Whatever you need." He looked over at El. "Even if you did just commit a federal crime. I'm still with you."

El laughed lightly.

"Maybe those agents deserved it, I don't know," Lucas continued. "We'll find out. Whatever this is, we're in it together."

"Thank-you-Lucas-really," Mike said, his voice breaking a little.

"All for one, you know. Party rules," Lucas said, standing up. "We'll know more once we've reconned Hawkins. We'll hurry back."

Dustin followed Lucas out the door, closing it behind him, and they were gone.

Agents Jack Smith leafed through a handful of Mr. Dustin Henderson's mail. He picked out one that looked promising and tore it open, but it gave no clues as to where the Wheelers and their friend might have gone. The inclusion of Mr. Henderson by the Wheelers had only made a complicated situation worse. Smith had hoped to keep the operation as quiet as possible, and each new person who got involved made his job more difficult. Still, if the Wheelers were seeking help from friends and family, that gave him a list of places to look. He already had eyes on the homes of both Mike Wheeler's parents house and Mr. Henderson's parents house, as well as wire taps. Both of them lived in Hawkins, so it was entirely possible his targets would try to contact their families. Smith had even gone to the effort of sending a few of his people to surveil the home of Mike Wheeler's sister and her husband, who lived in New York. That was a

long way to go, but it was conceivable that they might run that far.

Having learned nothing from Mr. Henderson's mail, Smith tossed it back onto his desk. He picked up his coffee mug, realized it was empty, and set it back down with a sharp clink. Deciding that he'd procrastinated long enough, Smith pushed his chair away from the desk and stood up. He gathered the file folders he would need, and headed out the door. He'd chosen to use a motel in Cartersville as his temporary office while he was running the investigation. The room he'd given Walter was as far from his own as the little motel allowed. He didn't like Walter. He didn't like being too close to Walter. He didn't like talking to Walter. If the man's special talents could shave days off their investigation, though, he couldn't help but use them.

Smith knocked on the door, only as a formality, and then used a master key to let himself in. He found Walter inside, hunched over his own little desk, sketching something in pencil on a single sheet of paper.

"Good morning, Agent Smith," Walter said to him, without looking up. The man was old and thin with a heavy smoker's rasp. He was dressed in a gray sweater and penny loafers, and gave no outward appearance that he was special.

"Do you have anything for me?" Smith asked, without preamble.

"I had many dreams last night," Walter told him. "But I don't know where your fire-starting child is. If I did, I would have told you earlier."

"Anything at all?" Smith pressed.

"Yes," Walter allowed, finally looking up from his drawing. He held it for Smith to see. It was a simple, though very good, pencil sketch of a man sitting down with a plate and coffee mug. "This is what Boris Yeltsin had for breakfast yesterday."

"Fascinating," Smith grumbled.

"I don't control my dreams, not really. You know that," Walter said. "Sometimes what I see is mundane, sometimes it's critical." He picked

up a second drawing from the desk, which did a lot more to catch Smith's eye. "This one will interest the boys back at the agency," Walter told him. "It's a Russian nuclear silo. I saw it, in my dreams, clear as day, but I have no idea where it is. Somewhere in Siberia, I'd guess. The boys will have to spend hours comparing it with satellite photos to figure that out. You see how this works? I can't close my eyes and see whatever you ask for. The dreams come to me in their own time."

"Anything at all that relates to THIS case?" Smith asked, impatiently. As useful as it might be to keep an eye on Russian nuclear bombs, that wasn't why they were in the middle of now-where Indiana. For now, he was only interested in the Wheeler family and whoever might be helping them to hide.

"Yes, but it's nothing you can use," Walter said. "I can tell you that the child is currently safe with her mother."

"Safe?" Smith asked.

"She feels safe," Walter said. "And calm. That's the feeling I got. My dreams didn't tell me where she was. If they do, you'll be the first to know."

Smith slapped his file folders down on Walter's desk and took out several photos. Most of them were recent, taken only the day before, though a few had been taken from the ten-year-old files that had been confiscated when Hawkins Lab had been shut down. He slid the pictures across the desk to Walter and spread them out so he could get a better look. There was a photo of Mike Wheeler's parents, along with their middle-school aged daughter, Holly. There was also a low quality photo of Mr. Henderson that had been quickly taken from a poor angle. Smith supplemented that photo with a better, though badly out of date photo, of young Mr. Henderson that had been taken and filed away back when Hawkins Lab was still operational.

Walter's eyes skimmed over the half dozen other photos of family and known friends of the Wheelers.

"You don't want to give me too much to work with," Walter cautioned him. "If I go to sleep with too many images on my mind, my dreams

will be jumbled and disjointed. You won't learn anything."

With a scowl on his face, Smith took back all of the photos except for the two of Mr. Henderson. He had his men observing all the others, so he would presumably know if the Wheelers turned up at any of those places before Walter knew. He slid the new and old photos of Mr. Henderson closer to Walter.

"This one, then," he said. "We know Mr. Henderson is with the Wheelers." Smith shuffled the other photos and slid them back into the file folder along with a number of other documents. As he did, his eyes fell across one of the other old photos. He examined it for a moment, his curiosity piqued.

The photo, like some of the others, must have been taken a decade ago when the Lab was still operational. Whoever had taken it was likely either dead or no longer a part of the agency. It showed four children on three bicycles with tall power lines in the background.

Young Mr. Wheeler was instantly recognizable in the old photo. Though he was ten years younger, his features hadn't changed that much. The child seated on the bike behind Mr. Wheeler, Smith knew, was the current "Mrs. Wheeler." He only knew this because he had studied the documents and photos extensively. In fact, the girl in this old photo was nearly unrecognizable. Her head was shaved and she was wearing boy's clothes. That helped him to date the photo, since hear head had also been shaved in the photos he'd seen of the test subject designated as "011." A lot of the documents from the Lab's active days had been redacted or destroyed, but Smith had indeed seen a number of photos of test subject 011 undergoing various tests at the Lab. If he hadn't been allowed to read as many of the documents as still existed, he would have had a hard time connecting the old photos of subject 011 with the present day Mrs. Wheeler.

His eyes roved to the other two boys in the bicycle photo. One of them he recognized as young Mr. Henderson. The last boy happened to be facing away from the camera, so he face wasn't visible. Deciding this photo held nothing useful for Walter, Smith filed it away. But it reminded him of another old photo he'd seen. He searched through the folder until he found it. This one featured three children walking out of school. Again, Smith had no date for the

photo, but it must have been about ten years old, judging by the childrens' faces. Again, he recognized the young Mr. Wheeler and the young Mr. Henderson. The third boy's face looked familiar as well. Another quick search through the folder confirmed his initial guess. He found a wrinkled and torn missing-poster with the same face. It was the face of William Byers, the boy who had been at the heart of the crisis that had led to the Lab being shut down. Smith hadn't paid much attention to that boy on his first reading of the old documents. Of course, the boy would be in his twenties by now, and Smith didn't have any current photos on hand, but it would have to be good enough.

He slapped the missing-poster down in front of Walter, next to the two photos of Mr. Henderson.

"This one, too," Smith said. "Let me know the moment you have anything. If it's the middle of the night, wake me up." With the frustrating feeling that he was overlooking something important, Smith briskly walked out of the hotel room, closing the door sharply behind him, and leaving Walter alone with his drawings and the photos.

The forests and cornfields of southern Indiana rolled past as they cruised down I-69. Lucas had argued that there was no need to take the back roads, since no one was looking for his car. They'd been driving over four hours from Chicago and were nearly to Hawkins. Dustin offered his Pringles to Lucas, who took them without hesitation.

"So how does a big operation like Hawkins Lab stay a secret from the government, anyway?" Dustin asked.

"Well, for one thing, the budget is huge," Lucas told him. "There's no one person who knows where every dollar ends up. It's just way too big. So the budget gets spread out over different departments. You know, the Department of Defense, the Department of Energy, the Department of Education... Each of those budgets is pretty big, so even something as expensive as Hawkins Lab can hide pretty easily. If somebody higher up wanted to check the Department of Energy's accounting books, there might just be a line that says 'Hawkins

National Lab: X number of millions of dollars' with no more details than that. Somebody would really have to know that there was something to find, or they'd never go looking for it."

"So you don't think that Dr. Brenner worked for the CIA?" Dustin asked.

"Not really," Lucas said. "That's not the kind of thing they do."

"How do you know?" Dustin protested.

"Ok, I'm pretty sure that's not the kind of thing they do," Lucas amended.

"They showed you all their dirty laundry, did they?" Dustin asked in a snarky tone.

"I'm just telling you, from the people I've met and the people I've talked to, that's not what they're like," Lucas argued. "Look, have YOU ever even seen someone from the CIA?"

"I don't know, do the agents that chased us on our bikes with their vans when we were kids count?" Dustin asked.

"No," Lucas snapped.

"Then how about the ones that tried to kidnap baby Allie yesterday?"

"I don't know!" Lucas said in frustration. "Listen, the CIA is full of people, that's all. People, just like you and me."

"Bad people," Dustin remarked.

"How about this," Lucas tried. "Are teachers good or bad?"

"Teachers are great," Dustin said. "They help you open curiosity doors."

"You're thinking of Mr Clarke and Mike, people like that," Lucas said.

"Sure," Dustin agreed.

"What about Mr. Kowalski?"

Dustin made a face.

"Or old Ms. Ratliff?" Lucas pressed.

Dustin shuddered visibly. "I hope she's not still around."

"You see my point?" Lucas asked. "You find good and bad people everywhere. Me, I know a few people who went to the CIA. A few of the guys I used to know in the army. A friend of mine named Smitty, from basic training, he got recruited by the CIA. It's people like that who I'm talking about. They didn't join the army hoping that one day they could run a secret government lab that does illegal experiments. Sure, there are a few Dr. Brenners out there in the world, but only a few. And most people don't like them, so they don't make it very far."

"Then who are the agents who were spying on my house?" Dustin asked. "Tax collectors?"

"I wish I knew," Lucas said, looking concerned. "We'll know more when we finish our reconn. We're almost to Hawkins."

The monster usually moved around by night. It was easier to avoid prying eyes that way. This late at night, the streets of the outskirts of Los Angeles were almost deserted. He'd been dreaming again, and his dreams had finally shown him where he wanted to go next. He waited in the shadow of an abandoned building until he saw the glow of approaching headlights. When he felt that the van was close enough, he stepped out into the road.

The headlights flooded over him, exposing his inhuman visage to the van's lone occupant, who slammed on the horn and the brakes at the same time. The monster had timed it well, as the van was able to skid to a stop just a few feet from hitting him. He slowly walked around to the driver's side door, where the man inside was panicking and shouting. At first the driver had been horrified that he'd nearly killed a man. Then his reaction only worsened when he laid eyes on just what it was he'd nearly run over.

By then, though, the monster was close enough to do his work. He locked eyes with the panicking driver, and poured out his willpower

into the man, giving him a strong mental "push." For a few seconds the man's eyes rolled back in his head until only the white was visible. He gave a little shudder, and when his eyes came back, they were glazed and unfocused. He was no longer panicking, though. He sat behind the wheel, calm and docile, awaiting his instructions.

The monster moved around to the back of the van, opened the door, and climbed inside. The rear area was mostly empty, and even tall enough for him to stand. As he closed the door, he gave his wordless instructions to his new thrall, who took his foot off the brake, and headed down the road with a new destination in his head.

6. Chapter 6

Mike had finally fallen asleep on Will's couch with baby Allie also asleep on his chest. El knew he hadn't gotten more than a few hours of sleep each night since the fire, so she was careful not to wake either of them as she slipped quietly off the couch and padded into Will's kitchen where he sat at the table drawing. The house was dark and quiet. Lucas and Dustin had been gone for hours on their scouting trip to Hawkins, so the rest of them had settled down to wait. El was glad that sheer exhaustion had overcome Mike's nervous energy, because she knew he was wearing himself down to the bone, worrying about their little girl.

She wished she could say something to make him feel better, but she honestly wasn't a fan of saying words that sounded helpful but weren't true. El had lost track of the number of times she'd heard people say something like "I promise, it will be Ok," when, in fact, the person speaking had no possible way of knowing what would happen in the future, and no ability to ensure whatever happened would be good. El wondered why people enjoyed being lied to so much. If Dustin or Will had told her, "Don't worry, Allie will stop having nightmares tomorrow and you'll never need to worry about another fire," she wouldn't have been very reassured. Thankfully, they hadn't tried to put her mind at ease by telling her things they couldn't possibly know for certain. In the same way, she didn't want to tell Mike that everything would turn out alright. She very much hoped everything would turn out alright. She very much hoped the agents would stop searching for her baby and that Allie would learn to control her own abilities. But she had no way to know if or when those things would ever happen, so she wasn't going to tell Mike something that wasn't true. She did hate to see the worry eating him up inside, though.

El slid into a chair across from Will at the table and tucked her knees up to her chest. As long as she kept her senses open, she felt confident that she'd know if Allie was having a nightmare in time to do something about it.

"How is Allie?" Will asked, looking up from his drawings.

"Asleep," El told him.

"She's so big," Will said, almost as proud as if she were his own. "I haven't seen her since she was about..." he held up to hands to indicate how small she'd once been. "It feels like it's been forever. I kinda wondered why you guys didn't visit more often, but now I guess you were dealing with the whole... fire thing. That must have been scary, the first time you ever saw her create fire."

El nodded, her eyes going out of focus as she thought back to those early days, right after bringing Allie home from the hospital for the first time.

"I can't imagine," Will continued. "I'd have been scared out of my mind. I mean, I'm just thinking of how my mom would be if she knew something bad might happen to me in my sleep. Did you know? That Allie would have... powers? You know, before you saw them for the first time?"

El considered the question for a long moment before answering. "Sort of," she said.

She looked down at his drawing, which had an Elvish princess on one side holding a drawn bow and arrow. On the other side stood something that was truly monstrous. It had hooves and horns and tentacles and fangs and way more eyes than it should have. El admired the artwork, even if the subject matter was a bit disturbing. She's always liked Will's drawings, and they'd only gotten better since they were children. He'd even done a big painting of her and Mike when they'd gotten married. That one had been on their wall and had burned up along with everything else in their house.

"This one's going in the new Monster Manual," Will said proudly. "It took a few drafts to get it looking how I wanted, but I'm happy with it now."

She knew he earned a living as an artist for the company that published Dungeons and Dragons. Their friends had been overjoyed when he'd gotten the job. He had a small stack of drawings on the table next to him, and El started shifting through the stack. She saw at least a dozen dragons of every size and color. She saw a creature

which she was proud of herself to be able to identify as a Balrog from the Lord of the Rings books. She stopped short when she reached the next drawing in the stack.

The creature that stared back at her had rubbery gray skin, long and slender arms with wicked claws on its hands, and a featureless face containing a mouth that split wide into tooth-covered petals. She felt an involuntary shiver run up her spine.

"Oh... sorry," Will said quietly, when he realized that she was staring. "If that one bothers you, I can-"

"It's alright," she told him, still gazing at the monster that had nearly killed all of them when they were just kids. Her eyes continued to be drawn back to that jagged mouth. Will had captured the details so expertly, it was a little frightening. She couldn't imagine spending hours with a pencil in her hand creating that image right down to the veins in its skin and the drops of saliva on its fangs.

The demogorgon had given her nightmares of her own, though they'd completely faded away after a few months. Being surrounded by loving friends for the first time in her life had helped with that. It seemed that Will still thought about the monster, though. She felt that she had no right to be bothered by his drawing, since he'd suffered through the most out of any of them. There had even been a brief moment where she'd been afraid that the monster had indeed killed him, like it had that poor girl named Barb.

"It actually helps," Will told her. "To draw it. Then it's not in my head anymore."

She put the drawing down and looked at him. "Do you think about it a lot?"

"Sure," he told her. "But it's not so bad anymore. It's just a part of who I am now. Like if I'd survived cancer when I was little, or something."

El nodded thoughtfully.

"It helped me get over a lot of things I was afraid of, too," Will said. "Like now, I can ask my boss for a raise whenever I want. What's the

worst that can happen? He tells me no? Whatever happens, I've been thoughth worse."

El laughed. It wasn't exactly funny, but it was a good way to look at things.

"I'm glad you guys came here to hide from the agents," he said. "I get a chance you help you, after all the times you've helped me." He gave a little playful grin. "It's about time. I thought you two would never get into trouble and need help." His gaze drifted away into empty space as he thought. "I'm sorry for how this sounds, but this whole thing kind of brought all of us back together again."

El nodded, following his line of thought.

"I mean, we haven't all five been together very often since we started moving away for college," he continued. "I miss everybody. I don't mind saying it. And then Mike... I think he's started relying on himself too much."

El raised an eyebrow in question.

"Well, you know El, we weren't the cool kids in school," Will told her, with a self conscious smile. "I mean, I know YOU thought Mike was cool, but the rest of the school sure didn't."

She did know that, in an abstract way. She'd understood the concept of bullying when she first met her friends. The idea of being abused by someone stronger was pretty familiar to her. But it had taken her a lot longer to understand the concept of popular kids in school, since she hadn't grown up in that kind of world. Since she loved her friends, she hadn't at first understood why most of the other kids at school didn't love them, too. She really hadn't understood why almost NO ONE at school loved them.

"And since we were on the outside," Will told her, "we had to depend on each other, cause we couldn't make it on our own. It really helped us, especially me. But, when Mike moved away to college on his own, he didn't have friends around him anymore."

El remembered those years. They'd been long and dark.

"And he just got used to solving problems by himself," Will went on. "And then he got a job and he got married and then he had a baby, all these normal issues that a normal person can solve in normal ways. But now he has a problem that's anything but normal, something that nobody can solve on their own, and he's not used to needing help from other people anymore, and it's really hitting him hard."

El craned her neck to look back at Mike and the baby, still asleep on the couch. "Yes," she said quietly.

"But we're all here for you," Will said. "Look at how quickly Lucas jumped into gear. He hasn't talked to Mike in a few years, but he'll do anything for you, I know he will. We all love Mike. And we all love you."

El blinked her eyes quickly to keep them from misting up.

Will reached across the table and picked up his drawing of the demogorgon and studied it thoughtfully. "You know, I don't even wish that this had never happened," he said. "If the demogorgon hadn't gotten loose, we never would have met you. You're our friend for the rest of your life, and I only had to run and hide from the demogorgon for a week. That sounds like a good trade to me."

El laughed again, but her voice caught in the middle.

"When this is all over, we need to spend more time together, all five of us. Promise?" He asked.

"Promise," El said. She cocked her head to the side as something caught her attention.

She looked back into the living room.

"They're back," she told Will, as she felt Lucas and Dustin approaching the door. She flicked her head to unlock it for them.

Mike sat up, rubbing his eyes, as they trooped in through the door.

"What did you find?" Will asked.

"Nothing good," Lucas answered.

"Hawkins is crawling with agents," Dustin said, dropping onto the couch next to Mike.

"I wouldn't say crawling," Lucas amended, "But it's definitely not safe for you guys to go back. You'd be spotted for sure. They're watching Dustin's house, Mike's parents' house, the school..."

"Who are they?" Mike asked, his voice rough from being asleep.

"I couldn't say," Lucas told him, moving over to perch on the couch's arm rest. "They have federal issue license plates, so they look legitimate, but they could be anyone. FBI, CIA, NSA... But they're definitely planning something big. There wouldn't be that many of them in one place, otherwise."

"Something big, like kidnapping baby Allie," Dustin said.

"You don't KNOW that," Lucas argued.

"Come on," Dustin said, throwing up his arms in frustration.

"What else would they want, Lucas?" Will asked in a much calmer voice than Dustin.

Lucas grimaced. "If I had to guess, if I really had to guess, I'd say someone a few steps up the ladder got scared when Allie..." he glanced at Mike apologetically, "burned down the house."

"Scared?" Mike asked.

"Wouldn't you be?" Lucas asked. "Remember, we know things that a lot of people don't. For most people, psychics don't exist. I brought up the subject a few times when I was in the Army, just to see what other people knew. I usually got laughed at. It's science fiction to them." He looked over at El. "I remember being scared the first time I saw you close a door, and this is way scarier." She nodded gently in response. "And Will, you know what Hopper's like. Tell me what you think he would have done ten years ago if he'd thought there was someone magically burning down buildings in Hawkins."

"He would have tracked them down and punched them in the face," Will offered.

"Exactly," Lucas said.

"Oooor," Dustin said,"they want to kidnap our little girl because they want to know how she uses her powers and they're going to lock her in a tiny room in a basement with no windows and-"

"You don't KNOW that," Lucas said again.

"It's a pretty good guess," Dustin argued.

"How can we know?" Mike interrupted.

"We could ask them," Will offered.

"Who's gonna walk up to the agents and ask to negotiate a truce?" Dustin asked.

"I'll do it," Lucas said.

"Vetoed," Dustin told him. "You're too valuable to the group. We can't afford to have you captured."

"Our party's a democracy, you don't get a veto," Lucas said to Dustin.

"In times of emergency, I do," Dustin said. "For the good of the party."

"What if they stay hidden?" Will asked. "How long do you think before the agents stop looking for them?"

"Too long," Dustin said. "If they ever do stop, that is. Mike and El have a life in Hawkins. We don't want them to hide for a year or something. No, we need to push back. I'm starting to like your blackmail idea, Will. We threaten to tell everything we know if the agents don't leave them alone."

"I don't think that's going to get you very far," Lucas said. "What we really need is more information. I can try to talk to some of my old Army friends-"

"Wait, I've got it!" Dustin shouted. "We kidnap one of the agents and ask him what they're plans are."

"That might be the worst idea you've ever had," Lucas said.

"Fine then," Dustin said. "I'm just brainstorming here. There are no bad ideas. How about this. We can spy on the agents. All El needs is a picture, right? So we go back to Hawkins, snap a few photos of the agents, make up a salty bath for El, and she'll be able to spy on them from here."

"It's risky," Lucas said. "You really want to get close enough to the agents to take their picture, and just hope they don't notice?"

"I'm sure you can handle it," Dustin told him, waving a hand dismissively. "What do you say, El? Would it work?"

"Maybe there's a safer way," Mike said. The other guys turned and looked at him. "They like to bug the phones. We build a bug of our own. Then we could listen to what they're saying at any time, and El wouldn't even have to go into the Void."

"We'd still need to get close enough to plant the bug," Lucas said. "It's still risky."

"Maybe not," Dustin said. He jumped up and started pacing. "We could park our car a few blocks away from the agents, and El could just levitate the little device all the way over. I could give it a magnetic base so it would stick to their car. I could make a bunch, and we could bug all their cars."

"Really?" Lucas asked skeptically.

"I build Heath Kits in an afternoon," Dustin said proudly. "This won't be a problem."

"I like it," Will said. "What about you, El?" She nodded her head quickly.

"What about you?" Dustin asked Lucas. "Want to make it a unanimous vote?"

"I wasn't against it," Lucas replied. "I only said it was risky. But it's a lot better than kidnapping a federal law enforcement officer and getting us all put in jail."

"You seriously don't understand the concept of a brain storm," Dustin protested. "There ARE no bad ideas. You throw spaghetti on the wall and see what sticks."

"How quickly can you make the bugs?" Mike asked.

"A few hours, but I'll need your help. So, how early does Radio Shack open?"

Smith had always been a light sleeper, so he was awakened by the scuffling of feet outside his hotel room door even before someone started knocking. Out of instinct, his had slid toward his gun.

"Wake up!" a man's voice called, as he began pounding, not knocking, on the door.

Recognizing the voice as Walter's, Smith groaned in annoyance.

"Smith! Wake up. Open the door!" Walter yelled, pounding even harder on the door.

The urgency in Walter's voice was like a bucket of ice water, bringing Smith fully awake. He crossed to the door in a few quick strides and pulled it open. Walter rushed inside like a cat let out of its cage.

"She'sinChicago!" he blurted out. Smith didn't even have time to speak before Walter went on, the words spilling out faster than his mouth could keep up.

"Ihadadream," He said. "She'sinChicago. Andtherwasafire."

"Slow down," Smith said, shutting the door so their conversation would remain private. "The Wheeler child? She's in Chicago?"

"Yes," Walter said, impatiently. He began to pace around the small hotel room. "And there was a fire."

"You had a dream?" Smith asked.

"Why do you think I'm here in the middle of the night?" Walter snapped.

Smith picked up his radio from the night stand and spoke into it. "Johnson, Stoneman, bring the cars around. I want to be ready to leave in ten." A moment later the two agents acknowledged in professional, robotic tones.

"Are you listening to me?" Walter demanded. "I dreamed about a fire."

"And contact the Chicago fire department for me," Smith added into the radio. "Find out if they responded to anything big during the night."

"Put that down and listen to me for a minute," Walter said, breathing as if he'd just run a mile.

Narrowing his eyes, and choosing to ignore the older man's tone of voice, Smith put the radio down.

"It hasn't happened yet," Walter said, still pacing. "The fire in my dream, it's huge. I'm talking city blocks. Thousands of people."

Smith was good at keeping shock and surprise from his face. In a very level and measured voice, he asked, "Are you sure about this?"

"I don't dream about the future," Walter hissed. "It almost never happens. The last time I did was when they had me working in Wako Texas."

Smith's face turned white as his blood drained away, and he found himself unable to hide his reaction.

"And I was dealing with a Firestarter there, too," Walter told him.

Raising the radio to his mouth again, Smith struggled to speak through a suddenly dry mouth. "Johnson, wake everyone up," he said into the radio. "Start packing the gear. I want the whole team mobile in half an hour." He glanced back to Walter, his mind racing. "You're

sure it was the Wheeler child?"

"The people I usually work with know better than to question my insights," Walter growled.

The jab barely registered to Smith, who grabbed his shoes from under the bed, and his suit jacket from the back of the chair where he'd draped it before going to sleep.

"Call Director Carver," Walter said.

"I will," Smith told him, still too shaken to take offense. "As soon as we're in position to make our approach."

"No, call him now," Walter said. "You need more than just your team. There's no time to play games."

"When does this fire happen?" Smith asked.

"I don't know that," Walter snapped. "But it doesn't matter. You can't afford to waste time trying to keep this clean and quiet. Call Director Carver. He needs to bring the police, the FBI, the Army, everything. This isn't a small operation anymore."

"Sorry, that's not up to you," Smith said, only mildly annoyed as his brain continued to run through all the implications of what he'd just learned. He scooped up the file folders from his desk, tucked his gun back into its holster, and did a quick scan of the room to make sure he hadn't left anything behind. He was just opening the door to leave when Walter grabbed his wrist to stop him.

"Stop playing your little spy games, Agent," Walter said. "The situation is too big for that now. You need to call Carver and have him bring in more assets. The subject needs to be found and eliminated before she burns down a whole city."

Smith slapped away the older man's hand and pressed him backward, up against a wall. "You don't give me orders," He said through clenched teeth. "This is a baby we're talking about." Smith realized that the radio was still in his hand and was now digging into Walter's shoulder. He decided not to relax his grip even an inch.

With his back pinned against the wall, Walter didn't even try to struggle, but his eyes blazed defiantly at the younger and stronger man. "You're in over your head," Walter told him. "A Firestarter is the most dangerous kind of psychic. You can't afford to handle her with kid gloves. She needs to be eliminated."

"Stop talking," Smith said, leaning his face in closer to Walter's. "I didn't want you on this case in the first place."

"You need me to find her," Walter said, not intimidated.

"Then do your job, and don't tell me how to do mine," Smith said. "We do this quietly, and no one gets hurt. Especially not a little girl."

"That's where you go wrong," Walter said. "You think of her like a little girl, you'll get thousands of people killed. She might as well be a Libyan with a suitcase full of plutonium."

"I'm done talking about this," Smith said, roughly pushing away from Walter and heading again for the door. "No kids are getting hurt as long as I'm in charge of this mission. Thank God no one will ever put you in charge."

"I'm trying to save people," Walter said from across the room.

"They aren't even your people," Smith said over his shoulder. "Don't act like you care."

Smith already had the hotel door open, and his radio was beginning to squawk with questions from the rest of his team. He couldn't get away from the old man with the freakish psychic dreams fast enough.

Will's kitchen table was littered with electrical components of every shape and size. Dustin had his first working prototype lying off to one side, while he and Mike worked busily to assemble more. Lucas came into the kitchen, stretching and twisting his back from a long time sitting on the couch.

"El beat me and Will at poker again. I think she cheated," Lucas said, picking up Dustin's prototype listening device and turning it over in his hands.

"It's because you always touch your chin when you're bluffing," Mike said, without looking up from his work.

"Wait... really?" Lucas asked.

"Don't drop that one," Dustin said, reaching over and tapping the prototype with his screwdriver. "I haven't wrapped it in its protective casing yet."

"You already tested it?" Lucas asked.

"Yep," Dustin said. "It should be able to transmit over a range of about five miles, which should cover most of Hawkins."

Lucas placed the bottom of the little bundle against Will's refrigerator, and the magnet held it in place. He tugged at it gently to see how strong the magnet was.

"Can I help with anything?" Lucas offered. "I don't have any more money for poker. El took it all."

"Maybe do some push ups?" Dustin suggested. "If we get caught trying to plant these bugs, I'm gonna need you to fight all the agents while we escape."

Lucas laughed. "That isn't part of the plan."

"Plan's go wrong sometimes," Dustin said. "That reminds me." He turned his head toward the living room and yelled. "Will, do you still have that book I got you?"

Will came into the kitchen a moment later, followed by El along with Allie.

"Which book?" Will asked.

"The one I sent you for Christmas," Dustin said.

"Sure," Will said, and disappeared back into his living. El wandered over to the refrigerator and plucked the prototype off of it. She studied it for a second, and then floated it a few inches above her palm.

"Yeah, just like that," Dustin said, glancing back up from his work. "Can you control it from a few blocks away?" She nodded.

Will came back from the living room and offered Dustin the book he was holding. "This one?" He asked.

"That's the one," Dustin said, taking the book, which was titled "1001 tips and tricks for spies." He leafed through it quickly. "This might be useful during our mission."

"Seriously?" Lucas asked him.

The entire grouped jumped at the sound of Will's phone ringing. The house had been pretty quiet since they'd arrived, and they were all feeling a little twitchy. Will hurried over to answer the phone. The others leaned in closer. Dustin held his breath.

"Hello?" Will said, sounding nervous. "Oh... hi Mom."

Dustin, along with everyone else, breathed a quiet sigh of relief. It wasn't scary government agents on the phone. It was just Mrs. Byers. Smart, inquisitive, intuitive Joyce Byers... Dustin's stomach jumped again. What if Joyce figured out they were there, and asked Will about it over an unsecure line? What if the agents were listening? He waved his hand to get Will's attention, then made a sharp slashing motion across his neck. Will stared at him in mixed confusion and alarm. Dustin repeated the slashing gesture and tried to mouth "Don't mention us," without making a sound.

Little Allie started to gurgle, and El moved away from the phone with her.

"Uhh.. No Mom, it's just me," Will said. "I'm fine. How are you?"

Joyce hung up the phone and continued to stare off into empty space, her eyes narrowed in suspicion. She hadn't thought there was anything out of the ordinary going on with her youngest when she'd called for a random chat. In fact, she'd simply been bored, because Hopper had been gone for several days, and she had today off of work at Donald's General Store. She'd only intended to catch up with

Will and pass a little time.

But, for some reason, Will was lying to her.

She didn't know what he might have gotten caught up in, but she could tell something was wrong, and he wasn't willing to talk about it. She continued to stare at the wall for another full minute before deciding that she needed to help Will with whatever trouble he was in, whether he felt safe talking about it or not. She snatched up her keys and jacket, and was out the door.

Smith bounced up and down gently, seated in the back of their mobile communications van, as the driver failed to miss one of Chicago's potholes. He barely noticed the bumpy ride as he tried to prioritize and multitask, drawing points on a paper map as he called over his radio to dispatch his agents to specific street corners. He was constructing a grid, and slowly tightening it around the Wheelers. As long as he was left alone to implement his careful and methodical approach, he'd have them in the bag, and no one from outside the operation would even know they'd been there.

He swore when his phone rang, certain that it could be only one person. Smith silenced his radio and answered the phone, clenching his jaw in anticipation of what he was going to hear.

"When were you going to tell me?!" Director Carver demanded over the phone. Smith glared at the empty wall in front of him.

"Walter went around me and called you?" Smith asked.

"Of course he did! What did you expect?" Carver yelled.

"Sir, you don't know if what he saw in his dreams is really going to happen. He's not 100%," Smith said through gritted teeth. He found himself wishing he'd put Walter on a plane back to where he'd come from.

"A known Pyrokete in a major city? It's too big a risk," Carver growled. "I want it over now."

"And it will be," Smith said. "But if we go in with our guns out again,

it will be just like Waco."

"At this point, I'll take it," Carver told him. "If she goes off like a bomb in Chicago, it would be the worst disaster in this country's history. You find her before that happens, and you eliminate the threat."

The man Hopper now called "Franc," the man he had once called "our Arsonist," for lack of a better name, sat in the back of a squad car. He was handcuffed, of course, for which Hopper felt a little bad, but there was no way he'd have been able to convince the Sacramento PD to treat Franc as anything other than the prime suspect in a string of murders across the city, which he unquestionably was. Hopper had been able, though, to convince the others cops to give him and France a little space. The cop who'd applied the handcuffs turned out to be a reasonable guy named Rick. After a short conversation, Hopper had been able to convince him that their prime suspect wasn't going to run off as long as he was there, so Rick had been generous enough to give them a little space. About ten feet of space, at least. Hopper counted himself lucky.

Sitting next to the handcuffed Franc, Hopper gazed sadly at the picture of a little girl that Franc had handed him. It was a different picture, but clearly the same girl that he'd seen in that police file the day before: Franc's little girl, whose face he'd never see again, except in that picture.

Hopper had shown the other man his own pictures. He still kept one of Sara in his wallet, even after all the years. In his mind, and in that picture, she'd been five years old for fifteen years now. He felt a tiny, distant sliver of pain when he remembered that she would have been twenty years old by now. But that pain wasn't as bad as it had been, partly because he had a couple other pictures to show Franc. He kept one of Will, and even Johnathan (even though that one was very independent and didn't seem to need a new father figure in his life) in his wallet, too.

The two men shared more than a few words, but those were less important than the understanding that passed unspoken between them. Hopper knew that it would have been the easiest thing in the

world for the other to let him die in the fire only a few hours ago, but he hadn't, and that was all Hopper really needed to know. There hadn't been any time at all to THINK about whether to save Hopper as he fell through the floor and into the waiting flames. There was no way to fake an instinctive reaction like that.

He'd been through a lot of stress over the last few hours, and Hopper felt he deserved a cigarette. He fished the pack out of his pocket, and took one. After a minute of searching, he realized that he must not have gotten his lighter back from Sam after giving it to him.

"You don't have a lighter on you, do you?" Hopper asked Franc. The other man shook his head.

"I don't smoke, actually," he said.

"Really?" Hopper asked. "That's good. Keep those lungs in shape. I uhh... I don't suppose you could... you know...?"

Franc stared at him with a blank expression for a long minute, then shrugged his shoulder. He shifted around in his seat to bring his hands, still cuffed together, in between the two of them. He held out an index finger, and an inch-tall flame popped into life and waited there, steadily flickering like a candle.

"Thanks," Hopper said, and leaned in to light his cigarette.

There was a quiet thump as officer Rick slapped his hand gently on the open door of the squad car to announce his return and interrupt their quiet moment.

"Sorry, friend," he said to Hopper, "but time's up. The chief wants me to bring him in now."

With a slow sigh, Hopper leaned back in his seat and let out a lungful of smoke. He tried to think of anything else to delay the inevitable and give Franc a little more time before being carted away, but nothing came to mind.

"Alright, I'm going," Hopper said to Rick. he turned to face Franc. It felt a little to awkward to try to shake his hand while they were cuffed, so he instead put a hand on the man's shoulder. "We'll talk

more once they've set court dates and everything," Hopper told him. "I promise, I'll do whatever I can. That might not be much, but..."

Franc nodded, his expression stoic and un-revealing. Hopper thought he was taking it well, considering.

Hopper stepped out of the car and stood back to watch as officer Rick closed the doors and drove off into the night. He let out another lungful of smoke as he watched the squad car's tail lights fade into the distance. Franc might never see anything but the inside of a prison cell as long as he lived. Still, as Hopper imagined a tragic police standoff with whole city blocks going up in flames, he decided the outcome could have been much worse.

A lone black sedan pulled into the lane right behind the squad car, and followed it silently off into the darkness. A little flicker of curiosity rose in Hopper, almost piercing through the visions of fire and mayhem, but not quite succeeding.

Sam came silently up to his shoulder. "I don't know what to say after all that," Sam said.

Hopper lingered in his frightening visions of what might have been for one last second before pulling himself back to the present. He turned to look at Sam and gave a sly half-grin.

"Sometimes I surprise even myself," Hopper said. "No thanks necessary. I'll just take all the money you have and you'll owe me for the rest of your life."

"Maybe I can get the chief to give you a pension as an honorary member of the SPD," Sam joked. "They could even have a ceremony where the mayor gives you a key to the city."

"You and the chief are back on good terms?" Hopper asked, joking himself.

"Actually we are," Sam said brightly.

"Yeah?" Hopper asked, offering him a cigarette.

"Yep. He called a little while ago, while you were in the squad car

talking to... our guy," Sam said. "When the boys called the chief to tell him they'd caught their man, or that their man had turned himself in, I suppose, the chief guessed I'd be mixed up in it somehow and asked to talk to me. He's not big on apologies, but told me he... regretted some of the things he said before. He wants me back on the force tomorrow."

"Imagine that," Hopper said, finishing his cigarette and tossing the butt onto the pavement.

"I told him I wanted a week off first," Sam said. "It's been a busy few days."

"You've earned a little sleep," Hopper said. "I don't know about a week, though. You'll be able to sit still for that long?"

"Actually, I was wondering if you wanted some company on the plane ride home," Sam said. "If you aren't sick of me by now."

"You, in Hawkins?" Hopper asked with a laugh.

"Well, you've made it sound so nice," Sam said. "I almost believe you. I really want to see the... trees. And the... small houses. And the... whatever else is there."

Hopper laughed again. "I had to sleep on your couch for a couple nights. I guess I could punish you by making you sleep on mine. And there's more than just trees and small houses in Hawkins. We have cornfields, too."

"And I can meet the famous Joyce," Sam added. "Does she let you bring friends over?"

"Not usually on school nights, but I think I can sweet-talk her," Hopper said. "Maybe I'll take you fishing, and you can fry some of them for her." He turned and walked back toward Sam's truck.

"Listen, Hop," Sam said in a more serious tone. "If I thought you'd take it... What are you driving these days?"

"A 1980 Chevy Blazer," Hopper said, shaking his head. "Don't worry. I keep her running like a Cadillac."

"I wish I could do something for you," Sam said. "You were the only one who believed me. The only one. I would have lost my mind."

"All I want is for you to help with him," Hopper said, nodding in the direction that Franc had been driven away. "Once they set up court dates and everything, I want you to help him as much as you can. Speak at his trial, yell at the prosecutor, whatever you can do."

Sam looked thoughtful for a moment, his hand resting on his truck's door as he considered.

"He's a good guy," Hopper insisted. "He's done some pretty messed up things, but he's a good guy, deep down. He could have let me die, but he didn't."

Sam nodded. "Ok, you've got it. Whatever I can do."

"Are we going straight to the airport, or back to your house first?" Hopper asked. "I should try to call Joyce again and let her know I'm coming back."

Joyce's mind wandered as she took the ramp off the highway. It had been wandering for a good part of the more than four hour drive from Hawkins. She wondered what Hopper had gotten dragged into when his old cop buddy had called from California. Because of the time difference and her work schedule, she'd only gotten messages from Hopper on the answering machine. In those messages, though, he'd sounded as serious as she'd ever heard him. He'd promised to tell her the whole story as soon as he got back home, which was supposed to be very soon, but kept getting pushed back.

She really wondered, though, what was troubling Will. She'd always been protective of her youngest, even after he'd grown up and moved off to college. Some people thought she was over protective. When he was a kid, some of the other parents from school used to talk behind her back. They'd said it was sad how she obsessed over her little boy, that she wouldn't let him grow up. Since Will had once been literally dragged into another dimension by a flesh eating monster, clearly she hadn't been protective enough. A car hurried up to slide in front of Joyce, only to be get stuck at the next traffic light. Chicago drivers

annoyed her. She hit the brakes to leave room for the reckless car, but it wasn't enough to pull her mind back to the here and now.

Will had been different after his brush with death at the hands of that freakish thing-in-the-wall. She'd watched painfully, unable to do much to help him in the months and years after that traumatic experience. Of course, he'd always been a loner. Aside from his three friends from school, Will had never socialized much. He was sensitive, and most kids were mean. He'd never been able to take it as well as Johnathan had. Then, after she and Hopper had brought Will back from That Place, there had been a whole new dimension to his feelings of isolation and vulnerability. Joyce had done her best to help her baby through the nightmares and flashbacks that came after his time in That Place, but really, it had been his friends who helped the most. A small smile grew on her face as she pictured Will at his 13th birthday party, surrounded by his friends, looking as happy and content as she'd ever seen him. It had been hard for her to accept at first, that there was very little she herself could do to help him through the struggles of growing up. She would much rather have followed him to school each day as his bodyguard, ready to flatten any bullies who strayed too close.

In the end, though, she'd realized that it was his friends who had helped him through it. It had been hard to let go. Fighting to the death would have been easier for her. But, eventually, she'd seen the kind of love that Will inspired from his friends. He was like a bright light that attracted only the very best kind of people. Even when most of the kids in school didn't see any value in Will, he seemed to naturally draw together those few people who did see him for what he really was. When he'd gone missing all those years ago, his three friends had put themselves in danger to try to find him, and without them, she and Hopper wouldn't have been able to find Will and bring him back. He didn't need to be a fighter like she was. He had an army around him. It might not have been a very big army, but Will's friends were worth more than a thousand regular kids. Especially once the girl Eleven had come back into Will's life, started living with the Wheeler family, and started hanging out with the boys, Joyce had been able to breathe easier. Though she would gladly have gone claw-to-claw with another demogorgon for her son, she could feel safe knowing that no bully or extra dimensional monster was going

to get to Will as long as Eleven was at his side. Another van cut Joyce off, nearly running a red light as it slid into her lane. She absentmindedly hit the brakes again, her body swaying forward with the halted momentum.

Watching Will move out of the house and go off to college, though, had been harder for her. Of course, she'd been sad to see Johnathan move off to NYU years earlier. She'd cried, like any mother would. But it had been different with Will. For the first time since kindergarten, he'd been going off into a world without any of his friends. In fact, not SINCE Will's first day at kindergarten had Joyce been so nervous to see him go as when he'd moved away to college. Probably the only thing that made it easier was when she'd looked over and noticed Hopper trying to pretend he wasn't wiping his own eyes. She sometimes still teased him about that. Another white van rolled by her.

A black sedan. A white van. Another white van.

Joyce straightened up in her seat, suddenly pulled out of her reverie. That white van up ahead had caught her attention. It had no name or logo or anything painted on the side, but the shape was eerily familiar to her. Perhaps a block further ahead was another identical white van. She squinted at the unfamiliar colored license plate, which was neither from Indiana nor Illinois.

Her eyes flicked to her rear view mirror. There was a black sedan a few cars back. It was hard to see from this distance, but it looked like the driver and passengers were wearing dark suits. Joyce took a deep breath. There was nothing strictly unusual about white vans, black cars, or men in suits. Each of those things, alone, were innocent and commonplace. Sometimes, especially since little Will had gone missing all those years ago, people told her she could be paranoid.

The intersection with 151st street, which was the street Will lived on, was just a few blocks ahead. Joyce would turn left onto 151st, and then she was only five minutes away from her son's house where, she hoped, she'd find out that nothing in the world was wrong, and she'd imagined the shifty tone in his voice when she'd talked to him on the phone earlier. One of the white vans was just reaching the traffic light. Joyce watched it's brake lights glow red as it slowed and then

turned left.

The stop light changed, and the the cross traffic began to move. Two more white vans cruised through the intersection and fell in line behind the first one. An army-green painted Humvee followed close on their tail.

Joyce jerked the steering wheel and leaped over into the next lane, acting on instinct. Her conscious mind didn't need to keep up. She turned into the first gas station, almost taking the turn on two wheels, and skidded to a stop next to the pay phone. She jumped out of the car, not bothering to turn it off. Her hands shook as she jammed coins into the payphone and dialed Will's number. She held her breath as she waited for the first ring. It seemed to take years. She pressed the black plastic hand set painfully hard against her ear and stared with hawk-like eyes at the intersection up ahead. That black sedan that had once been behind her in traffic, also slowed and turned left.

The phone rang a second time. Joyce shook with barely contained energy as she waited.

"Comeoncomeoncomeoncomeoncomeon, pick up Will," she said to herself.

Two more army Humvees passed through the intersection up ahead.

The phone rang a third time.

Joyce considered abandoning the phone and getting back in her car. Maybe she could take a side road and get to Will's house first...

"Hello?"

Her heart leaped at the sound of Will's voice.

"Will, honey, get out of the house, right now," she yelled, drawing stares from a few people pumping gas nearby.

"Mom?! What-"

"No time," she yelled. "Just go. There are vans and trucks and I don't

know who else. They're coming. Will, they're coming! Run!"

7. Chapter 7

Firebaby

Chapter 7

Mike bounced Allie up and down just a little in his arms. She made a happy sound that changed pitch at the top and bottom of each bounce. Will sat on the other end of the couch, working on a pencil drawing. He glanced back and forth between the drawing and the baby before he turned it around to show Mike. It featured a character who clearly had Allie's face, but with the green ears and brown robes of Yoda. The Yoda-Allie was lifting a muddy X Wing ship out of the swampy ground.

"Size matters not," Will said to Allie in an old, croaky voice.

"Judge me by my size, do you?" Mike added. He knew she had no idea what he was doing, but he found that he couldn't help himself.

Out of the corner of his eye, Mike noticed that Dustin, trying to be low-key, winked at Will. Mike was a little curious about that, but before he could mention it, the phone rang and Will got up to answer it.

"Hello?" Will said into the phone. Mike felt just a little bit of tension creep into his body. A phone call might be nothing, but it might be something, too. He glanced down at Allie and bounced her lightly up and down again. She laughed, making him feel a little better.

"Mom?! What-"

The alarm in Will's voice grabbed Mike's attention, and he jumped off the couch, feeling the need to run somewhere.

Will, still pressing the phone to his ear, spun around to look toward his front living room window, his eyes wide and afraid. The curtains were closed, though, as they had been since Mike and the others had arrived, to keep them hidden.

Mike crossed the room, squeezing Allie tight against his chest. He

pulled the curtain back barely an inch and pressed his nose against the glass.

He saw it.

With a sinking feeling in his heart, he saw a black sedan coming up the street, still several blocks away. There were more behind it, following in a long line. He turned to call to El, but found her already looking over his shoulder.

The curtain slid all the way open on its own. Mike glanced at El's face as she stared hard out the window and the approaching cars. Her features tensed and hardened. Mike heard the creaking sound of bending metal, and he looked back out the window in time to see a light pole snap off at the base and topple over. It came to rest, perfectly spanning the road, and blocking the cars.

"How many of them?" Lucas asked.

"A lot," said Dustin, who had pressed up behind Mike and El.

"Out the back door, hurry," Lucas said.

"What about our cars?" Dustin asked.

"Leave 'em," Lucas said. "We'll be harder to track on foot. Let's go!"

The six of them ran out of Will's back door, not bothering to close it behind them. Dustin scooped up an armful of his custom listening devices as he passed through the kitchen. They crossed Will's back yard and pushed their way through a row of bushes and into the neighbor's yard. They neighbors either weren't home, or didn't look out their windows in time to see a line of five people and a baby sprint across their back yard. Beyond the neighbor's house, they came out onto another suburban street.

"Keep moving," Lucas said, leading the way toward the next house across the street. The sound of tires and engines drew Mike's attention. He saw several more black cars coming down the street to his right. Behind him, El paused in the middle of the street. She waved her hand like she was swatting a fly, and the lead car was spun around in place, it's tires burning against the pavement. As soon

as she let go of the car to keep up with her friends, the agent in the car tried to reverse down the street toward them.

They were already cutting across the next lawn, though, and pushing their way through another row of bushes. They cross another lawn, and came out into the next street over.

"Two more blocks," Lucas urged them. "Come on. We need to get to a public place and lose them in a crowd."

Smith was only blocks away from where he knew the Wheeler family to be hiding when his radio went crazy. One by one his teams started reporting visual contact with the fugitives, then they began shouting and breaking radio protocols. From what he could gather through the audible chaos, his primary team hadn't even reached the house before encountering a roadblock in the form of a downed light pole. His backup team, moving into position on the next street over, had reported seeing the fugitives crossing that street before erupting into unintelligible shouts over the radio, after which they lost visual contact.

Trying to picture a street map of the neighborhood in his mind, Smith called over the radio to direct his third team to cut three streets over in the direction that he was pretty sure the fugitives were headed, hoping to cut them off. He stopped his car right in the middle of the road as he unfolded his paper map and double checked. One of his white vans stopped in the lane next to him and waited, the two of them blocking all traffic. People began to honk their horns behind him, but Smith ignored them.

His only guess was that someone had tipped off the Wheeler family. Nothing in the files he'd read suggested that Mrs. Wheeler had any precognitive abilities, so he didn't think she had "known" that he was coming even before he got close. Either they had an intelligence leak, which he very much doubted, or the Wheelers had been smart enough to post a lookout. He put the map down, scratching his chin. How likely was that? He hadn't read anything to suggest that the Wheeler family had any knowledge of how to run an operation like that, but sometimes people were smarter than they were given credit for. He glanced around the street, still ignoring the traffic at a

complete stand still behind him.

There was a lone woman standing at a payphone at the gas station on the corner. He didn't recognize her immediately, but her nervous energy caught his attention right away. She didn't look like a Russian agent or a psychic spy, but his gut told him that she wasn't there to make a social call. Acting on his hunch, he sped down the street toward her, calling over the radio to his agents in the white van to follow him.

She saw him coming and dove into her old, green Pinto. The mystery woman tried to peel out of the gas station, but Smith intercepted her. He braced himself hard against his steering wheel as he slammed on the brakes right in front of her. He managed to keep from hitting his head as she crashed into his passenger door. Before she had time to reverse, the white van slid into place neatly behind her, boxing the green car in.

Smith slowly and purposefully got out of his car and began to walk around it, taking his radio with him. He called for team three, asking if they had a visual on the fugitives yet. They reported a negative. He slammed the radio down on roof of his car in anger. If the Wheelers escaped... He knew exactly how Director Carver would react to that news.

He finished his walk around the car, coming up to the mystery woman's driver's side window. She glared at him with fiery eyes. He glared back just as hard. Maybe the Wheelers would escape today, despite his best efforts, but now he had something to bargain with.

"Hold on," Lucas told the group as they emerged from yet another row of bushes into yet another suburban sidewalk. They'd left the last squadron of black sedans three streets back. Mike struggled to catch his breath, still hugging Allie tightly against his chest.

"The Pine Ridge Mall is ten more blocks that way," Lucas said, pointing. "We can hide in the crowds there. As long as we keep cutting across the streets, we can out maneuver them. But if they guess where we're going, they can cut us off. We need eyes in the sky." He nodded toward a metal frame power line tower that loomed

above them. "El, can you get me up there? I can direct you from there."

She looked up at it, squinting against the sun, then nodded her head.

"Dustin, give me one of those," Lucas said, reaching for one of the listening devices. "I'll be able to see the agents coming from blocks away. Unless they lock down every street between here and there, I can find a clear path for you."

"What about you?" Will asked.

"I'll catch up, don't worry about me," Lucas said. "Once you reach the mall, get inside and stay with the crowds. Don't go anywhere the agents might be able to corner you alone. If they still want to keep this thing a secret, they won't be willing to lock down the mall and sort you out from the civilians."

"Are you sure you'll be-" Mike asked.

"I'll be fine. You guys go, and I'll meet you there," Lucas told him. "Ready, El?"

She nodded again.

Lucas took a deep breath and visibly braced himself as his feet lifted off from the sidewalk.

Hopper pulled into his driveway, bouncing over the familiar muddy rut next to his mailbox. As his truck bounced, Sam dropped a few of the peanuts he'd been given on the airplane.

"Here it is," Hopper said proudly. "Look how far away I live from other people. Isn't it great?" He frowned as he saw that Joyce's car wasn't there. If he remembered right, she wasn't supposed to be working today.

He and Joyce had moved into the house some years ago. He'd decided that his little trailer was only good for the habitually drunk bachelor that he'd been for a while, and Joyce's old house held too many bad memories (as well as a poorly repaired hole in one wall,

and some remaining scorch marks in the hallway).

Hopper parked in his usual spot, his tires sinking into their well worn grooves in the gravel, and he and Sam went inside.

"Cozy," Sam said.

"It's just the two of us, now," Hopper told him. "Will moved out for college years ago." He went to the refigerator, where Joyce always kept her work schedule stuck to the door. As he'd thought, she was supposed to be off work today. Hopper frowned again. Sometimes she took extra shifts as a favor to old, crusty Donald, who owned the place, and couldn't run it without her. Hopper had asked Joyce plenty of times why she kept working there, since they didn't need the extra money. He'd concluded that Joyce felt sorry for the old guy.

He opened the refrigerator and motioned Sam over. "Help yourself," he said, before crossing the room to his answering machine. He checked it, and found his last message to Joyce was still there, unplayed. He frowned again. Joyce always checked her messages. He took a quick look at the kitchen trash can to see if she'd thrown away any leftovers from her lunch, but found it to be empty.

"Hey, Sam, let's head into town for minute," Hopper told him. "Joyce might be at work. After that, I can take you to Bob's Fish N Fry."

"Sure Hop, let's go," Sam said.

"Stop there," Lucas' voice same over Dustin's listening bug, which he was using as a two way radio. "Agents coming up the street on your right. There's a brown house up ahead with a pool, cut across their lawn."

"Copy that," Dustin said.

Mike crouched a little as he ran, somehow feeling that it would make him harder to spot. They were more than halfway to the mall and, thanks to Lucas' eyes in the sky, they'd been several steps ahead of the agents the whole way. A few homeowners had yelled at them for running through their back yards, but that didn't bother him.

The baby was taking their cross country sprint remarkably well, though he was sure El had something to do with that. All things considered, he felt pretty confident that they'd make it to the mall without meeting death and disaster. Mike was surprised that he didn't feel the black shadow of anxiety quite so strongly as he had for the past few days. He found that to be a little ironic, since there were literally dozens, perhaps more, men in black cars and white vans coming at them from all sides, but he felt reasonably sure they'd make it.

Once they did get to the mall, though, he didn't know what would happen next. As he continued to run across someone's lawn, jumping to avoid a garden gnome, he had visions of the police surrounding the mall like a hostage situation.

"Now turn left," Lucas told them, "and take the next cross street. At the end of that street, you'll see a red house."

"Copy that," Dustin said again.

Hopper had decided to cut across Oak street on his way into town, because most of it was an unmarked 55 miles an hour, except for that one section where it slowed to 25. Since he'd retired, he usually tried to stay within 10 miles or so of the limit. Chief Powell never gave him too much trouble about it.

Though Hopper knew about every third or forth person in Hawkins by sight, if not by name, a lot of people he knew lived on Oak street. He passed the home of George Burniss, a known liar and story teller. He passed the home of old principal Coleman, who had overseen Hawkins Middle before handing the job off to Scott Clarke. A few more blocks down came Karen and Ted Wheeler's house. Living in the same house with Will meant that Hopper had seen quite a lot of Mike Wheeler, and also El, once she'd started living with the Wheelers. They were a fine family, as far as he was concerned. Ted was pretty docile, and never caused trouble. Karen seemed to have raised some pretty good children, even if she could rarely keep track of where they were. She used to sometimes visit Joyce and bring over a casserole. He absently wondered again if he'd really find Joyce at work, and, if not, where he'd look next.

Something caught his eye and pulled his wandering thoughts back to the present.

A black sedan was parked on the curb across from Karen and Ted's house. It looked very out of place. Hopper didn't know that many people in Hawins who drove that exact model of car, and he was pretty sure that the Murphy family, in front of who's house the black car was parked, didn't own one.

"That's strange," Hopper said, automatically slowing down as he neared the house.

Sam followed his gaze and squinted at the black car. "It's got a government plate," Sam noticed. "You have a lot of those in Hawkins?"

"No..." Hopper said, now scowling at the car. He slowed almost to a stop in the middle of the road and glanced across to the Wheeler house. Neither Ted nor Karen's car were in their driveway, though the lights were on in the house.

"What are you thinking?" Sam asked.

"I don't know..." Hopper said, only just coming to a decision himself. He had very little information to go on, but his gut told him something was wrong. An idea, possibly a bad one, coming into his head, Hopper pulled over and parked right behind the black sedan. He opened his door to get out.

"What are we doing?" Sam asked, sounding more curious than alarmed.

"Just follow me," Hopper told him. He got out of the truck, slamming the door and trying to look scary. He also tried to stomp as he went over to the sedan's driver's side door.

"Hey, open up," he yelled, even though the driver was already rolling down his window. Hopper put a hand on the door to keep it from opening, and leaned his face in close. It was a posture he'd practiced many times. He usually reserved it for the times when he pulled over Hawkins teenagers he'd caught driving around with a beer in their

car, when he wanted to scare them straight instead of actually write them a ticket.

"Are you the guys who've been parking on my grass?" He demanded. "Neighbor called and told me you were parked here all day yesterday when I was at work. I take care of my lawn like a golf course, you know."

"Sir, I don't know what-" the driver of the black car, a man in an equally black suit and sunglasses, began to tell hopper.

"And why are you parked in front of my house, anyway?" Hopper cut them off. "You guys cops?"

"Sir, if you'll just-" the agent, who appeared to be half Hopper's age, tried again.

"I know you're not Hawkins police, cause I'm good friends with the chief. That's right. A guy named Powell. You know him? We play poker every Thursday night."

"We're not-"

"Somethin about you doesn't look right to me," Hopper went on, not giving them any time to think. "You guys have badges, or warrants or anything? This is still a free country. I know my rights! I didn't go fight in 'Nam just to put up with this kind of thing. Hey, Sam," Hopper craned his neck to look over at Sam without giving the agent an inch of space. "Go inside and call Powell for me, would ya? I don't trust these guys."

"Sure, Jim," Sam said, putting on a little bit of an accent. "Should I call his house, or the office?" Sam left the truck and headed toward the front door of the house that Hopper neither owned, nor had a key to. Hopper held his breath for a few heartbeats, needing the agents to buy his bluff in the next few seconds before-

"That's not necessary," the agent told him. "This was just a misunderstanding. We're leaving now."

"What's your name?" Hopper asked, "I want names and badge numbers for both of you."

With a scowl that Hopper could see, even around the sunglasses, the agent started up his car and pulled away from the curb. Hopper leaned back to give them enough room to pull out, but only barely.

"I'll be watching for you," Hopper called after them. "This isn't Russia, you know!" They drove to the first stop sign and turned off of Oak street. Sam stopped just short of the front door to the random house, and turned back to Hopper.

"Who do you think they were?" Sam asked.

"I don't know," Hopper said, frowning in thought at the empty street where they had been a moment ago. "It's just lucky they were kids,or they'd have known better than to let me bully them. I'm guessing we have about five minutes before they call their boss and he tells them to get back here and find out who we are."

"And your plan is?" Sam asked.

"I'm concerned," Hopper told him, now turning to stare at the Wheeler house. The lights were still on inside, even though neither of their cars were home. He crossed the street and approached the front door.

"You know these people?" Sam asked.

"Yeah," Hopper told him. "And they got really wrapped up in all that... stuff that happened ten years ago."

"Ooooh," Sam said. "So it's no coincidence there are Men In Black spying on them?"

"Can't be," Hopper agreed, knocking on the Wheeler's front door.

"I'll keep a lookout," Sam said, turning his back to Hopper so his eyes were on the road where the black car had disappeared.

Hopper had to knock on the door three separate times before someone finally answered. The door swung open, and he was greeted by the youngest Wheeler girl, who was about middle school age.

"Hopper?" Holly asked.

"Hey, kid," he said. "Your parents aren't home..."

"Nope," she said casually.

"You know when they'll be back?" He asked.

"They both went to dinner. Separate dinners," she said. "Could be late. Especially for mom."

"Ok, well, this might sound a little... anyway, have you noticed anything strange lately?" Hopper asked, not sure how aware of such things the girl would be. Her blank stare wasn't very encouraging.

"Anything strange?" She asked.

"How about anyBODY strange?" Hopper tried. "Have you had any visitors? Men in suits? Have you seen anyone poking around?"

She only raised an eyebrow at him.

"Have your parents gotten any strange phone calls? Do you know?" He tried, starting to feel a little exasperated.

"Oh, are you talking about Mike?" Holly asked, as if she'd just figured out his question.

"Mike?" Hopper asked. "Is something wrong with Mike?"

"You don't know?" Holly asked. "The fire? I thought everybody knew."

"A fire? What happened?" Hopper asked, his suspicions really raised now.

"Yeah, their whole house burned down," Holly said. "It sounded pretty crazy."

"Their house? Are they alright? Are they staying here?" Hopper asked.

"They're not here," Holly told him. "They called mom the day it happened to let her know they were safe, and the baby, you know, but they didn't come over. I think they're staying with Dustin for a

while."

Hopper's mind started running at full speed. He had no idea what a house fire, the sudden appearance of shady agents, and maybe even Joyce all had to do with each other, but it was too much to be a coincidence.

"Listen, I don't think you should be here alone right now," Hopper said, looking over his shoulder at the road, though Sam was still standing lookout. "Is there somewhere you can go until your parents get back?"

"Huh?" She asked.

"Yeah, like a little friend that you have sleepovers with or something? Can you jump on your bike and go over to a friend's house for a few hours?"

"My bike?" Holly asked, looking lost.

"Don't kids ride bikes anymore?" Hopper demanded.

It took Hopper several more minutes to convince the girl, during which he grew increasingly nervous that the black sedan would return and catch him in the middle of some very suspicious behavior. He didn't want to scare her too much by coming right out and saying that her house was under surveillance, but in the end she let him drive her over to a friend's house on the other side of town. After dropping her off, Hopper drove back into town and checked Donald's General Store to see if Joyce was there.

She wasn't, and Donald told him that she wasn't scheduled to work, and hadn't picked up someone else's shift that day, either. At that point, Sam started asking what was wrong, but Hopper wasn't quite ready to speculate yet. He drove by Mike and El's house, to find that it had burned completely to the ground, just like Holly said. With an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach, he decided to go to Dustin Henderson's house and ask Mike and El about the fire. He also thought there was a small chance Joyce would be there, because she sometimes helped El with this or that.

"You think there's something not right about this fire?" Sam asked.

"Don't know," Hopper told him. "I have a bad feeling, though."

By the time they reached Kerley road, Hopper was drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. He wondered what had been happening in Hawkins during the few days he'd been gone. He wanted to regret leaving for California and being absent while whatever-it-was had happened, but he couldn't. He felt good about what he'd done with Sam, and for Sam, and for the guy he now called Franc.

He came to the stop sign and turned off of Kerley. He hadn't ever needed to come visit Dustin here, but there weren't that many roads in Hawkins, so Hopper had been by before.

"Look, there," Sam said, nodding toward the side of the road.

"I see him," Hopper said darkly, noticing the black sedan parked in the trees a little way off the road. He made certain not to stop and stare as he drove by. A few seconds later, he passed Dustin's house, again without stopping. The lights were off, and there were no cars in the driveway.

"So they're watching this house, too," Sam thought out loud. "I wonder who they are."

Hopper shrugged, scowling out at the empty road in front of him. He didn't know what to think.

"Let me guess," Sam said. "This Dustin was also involved in the stuff ten years ago?"

"Up to his neck in it," Hopper told him.

"So why now?" Sam asked. "What's happened to bring up old memories?"

"Wish I knew," Hopper said.

"What's our next move, then?" Sam asked.

"Are you sure you want in on this?" Hopper replied.

"Wherever it goes," Sam told him.

The agents had gotten Lucas as he was climbing down from the power pole. He'd been afraid they would. He was exposed up there, and as easily visible to some of the agents' cars as they were to him. He hadn't expected to get away clean.

At least his friends had made it to the mall, where he hoped they'd be able to cover their trail. If the agents, whoever they were, still wanted to keep things quiet, then they wouldn't send in the SWAT team and arrest Mike and the others in full view of hundreds of civilians. He had to hope that was still the situation.

The two agents got out of their car and approached Lucas, ordering him to put his hands up. He laced his fingers behind his head and waited for them. Just before climbing down from the tower, he'd given Dustin the "radio silence" order, and promised to catch up to them soon, so at least they wouldn't hang around at the mall waiting for him. Their only chance was to keep moving, and he hoped they wouldn't realize he'd been captured and come back for him.

The agents ordered him to turn around so they could handcuff him. They hadn't identified themselves as belonging to any agency, or read him any rights, or even told him he was under arrest. Those were all bad signs, suggesting that the agents didn't need to operate within the normal laws. Lucas only hoped that his friends were still running as fast as they could.

The Monster's dreams had shown him where to go. It was a federal prison full of regular criminals that were entirely beneath his notice, with one prisoner he wanted very badly to see. His dreams had been good to him. For a long time, he'd only dreamed of those who were either too weak to be useful to him, or too difficult to be worth the trouble. But those who could control fire were the most powerful kind of psychics, and now there were two of them. He'd never had a firestarter before.

It wasn't easy to get inside the prison and walk right up to the bars which held his prize, but the Monster had skills, both physical and psychic. When, at last, he stood face to face with the man, he stared at him for a long time. The man looked completely unremarkable, but in his hands, and in his mind, he had a power far more destructive than the Monster's own. The Monster thought about using his human voice to speak, but it was a decaying and atrophied thing that no loner suited his needs. Instead, he spoke directly into the mind of the man he'd come to see, the man with the powers.

At first, the man had seemed afraid of the Monster's appearance, which wasn't unusual. But, once he'd received the monster's thoughts, he recoiled. He wanted no part of it. The Monster was not concerned. If he needed to force his will on the other, he would do it.

8. Chapter 8

The chapters are getting shorter as we move toward the climax. All the threads are coming together.
We go into the Upside Down for the first time in this chapter. Please remember, like I said at the beginning, I started writing this story before Season 2 came out, so there was no Mind Flayer in my draft of this story. So our heroes aren't going to run into the Mind Flayer while they're walking around down there. I went in kind of a different direction. I still like the Mind Flayer, I'll just use him in other stories, instead of rewriting my plans for this one.

Chapter 8

"Three o'clock," Dustin said in a super-loud wisper. Will and the others snapped their heads around to the right, where they saw an agent in a black suit over by the mall's food court, touching a hand to his earpiece, presumably speaking to his other agents. Will and the others stopped in their tracks, spun around, and disappeared into the JC Penny.

"Did he see us?" Will asked.

"I don't think so," Dustin said.

"We look conspicuous," Mike said. "The four of us and a baby? We're easy to spot. If enough agents start combing through the crowd, they'll get us for sure."

They paused in the aisle between the men's shoes and women's clothing departments.

"I don't see a way out of this," Dustin said, panic starting to creep into his voice.

"Guys, I... I can help." Will said quietly. Everyone turned to look at him. Something in the tone of his timid voice held their attention. He suddenly felt like he was under a spotlight as the three others stared at him curiously. He swallowed against the sudden dryness in his

throat and searched for the right words. Allie squirmed in Mike's arms as the silence stretched out.

"What's your plan?" Dustin asked, prompting Will to talk.

"I think I can take us..." Will glanced over his shoulder reflexively, but stopped himself. He didn't need to worry about people listening in. Not now. "I can take us into the Upside Down," he blurted, before he lost the courage to say the words out loud.

"What?!" Mike asked, then glanced around the crowded JC Penny himself, probably wishing he hadn't said it quite so loud.

"You can do that?" Dustin asked, his eyes gleaming with excitement. That wasn't the reaction Will had expected.

"I can do it," Will repeated. "The agents won't be able to follow us. We can go wherever we want to, and then I can bring us back."

"How does that work?" Mike asked.

"You're a Planeswalker?" Dustin asked in awe. Will realized that he should have known his friend better. Dustin, of all people, wouldn't be afraid of the Upside Down. Will was, but Dustin had always been able to see the "fascinating" in everything.

"I've been able to do it ever since..." Will told them, nervously hunching his shoulders, as if he were hiding from watchful agents. Or from a prowling demogorgon.

"Ever since you were taken," Dustin said, matter-of-factly.

Will nodded.

"How come you never told us?" Mike asked, shifting the baby in his arms.

"I always suspected you'd have some lasting effects from your time in that place," Dustin said, not waiting for an answer.

El craned her neck to look as a man in a suit as he walked past. Everyone followed her gaze and held their breath as the man drew

near. She didn't do anything more than inspect him with her eyes, and possibly more than her eyes, so Will relaxed, just a little. False alarm.

"We should hurry," Mike said, when everyone had taken their eyes away from the random JC Penny customer in a suit. "How does this work?" He asked Will again.

"It's pretty simple," Will said. "I just... shift."

"Is it safe?" Mike asked.

"It's kind of empty," Will told him. "After El killed the Demogorgon," he glanced over at her, "I don't think there's anything else dangerous in there. Not really dangerous, anyway."

"So we just shift into another plane," Dustin said. "And then we find a safe place to revert to our world. Somewhere far away from the agents. They'll have no idea where we went or how we got there. It's a great plan."

"The only thing..." Will said, biting his lip. "I don't know if it's dangerous for Allie. I mean, a baby might be more vulnerable than adults."

"How long would we be there?" Dustin asked. "Your mom and Hopper were in the Upside Down for a little while. Nancy, too, and they didn't have any after effects, did they? Or are your whole family Planeswalkers now?"

"No," Will said. "Nothing ever happened to them, that I know of. I was there the longest. And I was a kid, so maybe it effected me worse. That's the only thing I'm worried about." He gazed down at the baby in Mike's arms. Mike looked from Allie to El. Will watched them share a wordless conversation. Over his years with El, Mike seemed to have done pretty well to make up for his lack of psychic abilities. He could understand El's eyes better than any of them. The two of them shared a long, long moment without words, then Mike finally nodded and broke eye contact. He turned back to Will and nodded again.

"We'll have to risk it. I don't see any other way past the agents, except for El bringing the roof down on our heads," Mike said to Will. "We'll just need to be fast. We get in and out, so Allie isn't exposed to the place any longer than she needs to be."

"Ok," Will said. He looked around the store one more time. All the passing customers were making him nervous. "Not here, though. We should find somewhere away from all these eyes."

"In here," Dustin said, pointing to the fitting rooms in the back of the women's clothing department. Mike nodded again, and they moved off as a group. Will hoped no one was watching as four adults (only one of them a woman) and a baby squeezed into one of the little fitting room booths. A silky night gown dangled from a hanger in their little booth, and it fell to the floor as Dustin squeezed in, shutting the door behind them.

"Ok," Will said again. "I think this will work. I've never taken people with me before. Uh... maybe hold hands?" They instantly complied with his suggestion. Will felt the weight of all the eyes on him again. "Maybe you should cover Allie's face?" He said. "The air down there is full of... particles." Mike took off his jacket and wrapped the baby in it. Will realized he was stalling. It was time for him to work his magic. He looked at each of his friends in turn. "Ready?" He asked, as much for himself as for them. They nodded somberly.

Will closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He didn't usually travel in this direction. He knew how to come back FROM the Upside Down. That was easy by now. Getting there was the same principle, though. Trying to shut out all the outside distractions, he focused his mind and pushed.

He had gotten used to the feeling of falling and spinning 180 degrees by now. It had happened to him plenty of times. Before he opened his eyes he felt the familiar cold that seemed to penetrate his clothes. It wasn't just that the air in the Upside Down was a lower temperature than the normal world he'd left behind. It was just a sense of pitiless, lifeless cold.

Along with the cold was the dank and moldy smell, the smell of decay, as if everything in the Upside Down was in a constant state of

dying, but nothing ever decomposed and went away. It was always there. All of it.

Will opened his eyes and looked around at his friends. Their faces were a sickly gray in the unnatural darkness. Dustin swung his head in every direction, his expression half amazement and half revulsion. Mike looked down at Allie, his face tense with worry. El's face had a touch of fear. It was only a touch, but it was there. She drew a little closer to Mike, and they shared another of their wordless looks. Will had never really asked El about her short time in the Upside Down, but he'd always assumed it had been a terrible event.

"This is... whoa," Dustin said, still staring around in wonder. "You sure there aren't more demogorgons?"

"I've never seen another one," Will said. "I always guessed the one that El got rid of was one of a kind."

"Which way?" Mike asked, starting to stare around at the place himself. "It all looks so different down here."

"We're in the same place," Will told him. "It just looks broken and crumbling and... rotting, and stuff. Look. There's the cash registers, and there's the jewelry counter. The parking lot is this way."

They started to move out of the little fitting room, which only had two of it's original four walls. The other two walls had crumbled and fallen down. Dustin tripped and nearly fell.

"You'll need to watch out for those vines," Will told him. "They don't really do much, but they move a little. They kind of grab. It's easy to get caught up and trip on them."

"Got it," Dustin said, watching the floor as he picked his way carefully through what had been a clean and brightly lit department store. "Whoa! What are these?" Dustin pointed with the toe of his sneaker and poked a finger-sized slug that was creeping along one of the vines.

Will instinctively put a hand over his mouth. "Don't worry about those," he said. "They're gross, but they're pretty harmless."

They worked their way through the store and out into the parking lot. Instead of the sunny, blue sky they'd left behind, the air above them was dark and full of mist, as if there never had been and never would be a sun. Will didn't pay much attention. He'd seen it before. He put his hands in his pockets, even though he knew it wouldn't help to keep them warm, and trudged ahead, leading the way with Dustin at his side. Mike and El followed behind, keeping very close to each other.

"Does it always look like this?" Dustin asked, gaping up at the sky.

"Uh-huh," Will said.

"Do these work?" Mike asked, nodding toward one of the many cars parked outside the mall. Will shook his head sadly.

"Electronics don't last long down here," he explained. "I brought a video camera once, but these cars have been here a long time."

"How often have you been here?" Dustin asked, still taking in the apocalyptic version of the Chicago suburbs that surrounded him.

"More often than I'd like," Will said. "It started after Mom and Hopper brought me back. I didn't know what it was or how to control it. I would just shift at any random time. It was so scary. At first, I didn't know how to come back, so I'd just curl up in a corner and shiver and cry until I shifted back. Sometimes I'd be gone for hours at a time. Sometimes I'd wake up in the morning in the Upside Down. I'd shifted there some time in my sleep without knowing it. I never told anyone, though. I made up a million excuses. If you ever remember me vanishing in the middle of class, and later I'd tell you I had to run to the bathroom or something..."

"I assumed you were developing irritable bowel syndrome," Dustin said honestly. "Stress can do that to people."

"Nope," Will laughed, for the first time in a few hours. "I was just taking involuntary vacations to the Upside Down. Eventually I learned how to control it, though. After a while, I didn't shift away very often, and I figured out how to come back. I never thought it would be useful one day."

"You should have told us about it," Dustin said. "Maybe we could have helped you."

"I didn't tell anyone," Will said. "It just made me feel like a freak."

"But you're our freak," Dustin told him, putting a hand on his shoulder. "And look at you now. Will the Planeswalker, saving all our lives."

"Does it hurt you?" Mike asked from a few paces behind. "Or does it drain your batteries when you use your powers, like El?"

"I wouldn't call them powers," Will said with a shrug. "But no, it doesn't take anything out of me. We could shift back and forth all day if you wanted."

"We should tell Lucas where we're going so he can meet up with us," Dustin said, holding up his home made radio. "Will this work in here?"

"The signal will be a lot weaker," Will told him. "I mean, I guess El could boost the signal, but we can just wait to call him until we shift back."

Lucas put his hands behind his head and turned around, as the agents demanded. He heard the click and rattle of a pair of hand cuffs as one of the two agents came up behind him.

"Am I under arrest?" He asked, fishing for information. "Who are you guys? NSA? FBI?"

"Quiet," the first agent said to him. Then, to the other agent, he said "Radio back to Smith. Tell him we got one of them."

Lucas listened to the second agent speak into the radio. Nothing about this felt good. Most government agents were required to tell him that he was under arrest, and that he'd get to speak to a lawyer, eventually. If these suits were going to put him in a little box for who-knew how long while they continued to chase after Mike and the others...

"Is it against the law to climb a power pole? I just wanted to see the view from up there." Lucas winced as he realized the agent with the handcuffs was moments away from searching him and finding Dustin's home made radio. Not only would they be keyed into the channel Lucas and Dustin had been using, but, if they were devious enough, the agents might just call out to Dustin and the others, say that they'd caught Lucas, and threaten to shoot him if the others didn't turn themselves in. Lucas was very much afraid his friends would be foolish enough to take the bait.

"Listen, guy," he said over his shoulder. "On the off chance that you're just a patriot doing your best to serve your country, I apologize for what I'm about to do."

The agent grunted in surprise, but Lucas was already spinning around. His fist caught the man in the jaw before he had time to react. Before the first agent hit the floor, the second agent whirled around, looking up from his radio conversation. Lucas barely had time to cover the distance between them as the second agent was reaching for his gun, but he dropped that one with a second punch. He snatched up their guns and radios from the ground before they started to wake up.

"Sorry guys. I hope this is all just a big misunderstanding." He briefly considered taking their car, but was sure it would have a tracker on it. With the unshakable feeling that he'd jumped headfirst into the deep end, Lucas sprinted off after his friends.

Hopper leaned heavily against the payphone at the Mobile gas station in Cartersville as he listened for the phone to ring. He drummed his fingers nervously, afraid of what no answer might mean.

"Hello?"

"Uhh..." Hopper was surprised by the unfamiliar voice.

"Hancock residence. This is Don. Who's calling?" Came a polite, middle aged male voice.

"Who the hell are you?" Hopper demanded.

"Don Hancock. And may I ask who's calling?" The voice was stupidly polite, as if he'd called some customer service line.

"I just called Will Byers' house. You're not Will," Hopper growled into the phone. "Who are you?"

"I'm sorry sir, you must have the wrong number," the voice said. "If you tell me who you are, maybe I can help you find who you're looking for."

"Listen you slimy-"

"There's no need for that, sir. Just tell me who you are and I'm sure I can help you find your friend."

"Did you do something to Will?" Hopper demanded.

"I really don't know what you're talking about," the polite voice said. "Now I'm sure I can help you if you'll just-"

"What are you doing on Will's phone? If you've hurt him, so help me-"

"If you'll just calm down, sir," the voice said.

"Listen, whoever-you-are," Hopper yelled. "When I find you-"

"Please sir, there's no need-"

Hopper slammed the phone down and glared at it. He'd expected the nervous fear that would come from getting no answer at Will's house and not knowing if there were government suits there, or if Will was even caught up in this whole mess, whatever it was. Instead he'd gotten something worse.

He stomped across the gravel and dropped back into his truck, slamming the door shut. Sam offered him a cigarette.

"Someone else answered Will's home phone," Hopper growled. "They really wanted to know who I was, too."

"So that means they don't already know to be on the lookout for a Jim Hopper," Sam offered. "They would have access to phone

recordings of your voice, and they'd know it was you right away, if that's what they were waiting for. So that means, whatever these Suits are working on, they don't know exactly who's involved in it, which means we still have the element of surprise."

Hopper sucked at the cigarette angrily, thinking.

"Do you want to do this the smart way, or the crazy way?" Sam asked. "I'm up for either one."

Hopper cranked the key and put the truck in gear. "I'm going to Chicago. You sure you want to come along? I might end up in jail or shot."

Sam rolled his eyes. "Just drive."

Joyce wasn't handcuffed to the chair, but she was a small room with no windows and no knob on the inside of the door. There was a tiny security camera mounted in one corner of the ceiling. She wasn't sure exactly how long she'd been inside, since they'd taken her watch. She'd spent some time banging on the door and shouting for them to let her out, or come in and restrain her, or something, anything. But they seemed content to keep her on ice for a while, so she'd grown bored of all the kicking and screaming and sat in the lone chair at the lone table and waited there, glaring down at her fingernails, until they finally decided to make their move.

The sound of the door opening woke Joyce from her angry trance, and she looked over her shoulder to see a single man in a dark suit. He brought a chair of his own in with him. After closing the door behind him, he walked slowly and purposefully over to the opposite side of her little table and sat across from her. It was the same man who'd slammed his car into her, or let her slam her car into him, right after she'd gotten off the phone with Will. He sat in silence for a long time, waiting for her to speak, but she only glared back. Finally, he broke the silence and reached inside his suit jacket to offer her a pack of cigarettes.

"Mrs. Byers. May I call you Joyce?" He asked.

"No."

He continued to hold the pack of cigarettes toward her for another moment, but she ignored them.

"Alright, Mrs. Byers, then," he said, dropping the rejected cigarettes on the table. "I'll be quick and I'll be honest. Your son is in danger. We're trying to protect him. I need you to tell me where he is."

"You're wasting your time," she told him.

"I hope not," he said. "Because I really am trying to help. I don't think you understand the situation. Will is in real danger. His life is at stake. Other lives, too."

"You mean he's in danger from a bunch of Suits in black cars and white vans?" She asked.

"I told you, we're trying to help," he said. "I believe you can tell me where your son is. Help me to help him."

"You're wasting your time," Joyce repeated. "He's in a place you'll never find him."

"Where?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," she laughed.

The man scowled at her. He took a long breath, maybe to calm himself, glanced over at the camera in the corner of the room, then dropped a file folder on the table. He opened it and turned it around to face toward Joyce. She saw a few old photos of Hawkins lab before she looked away in disinterest.

"I wasn't here when all those things happened in Hawkins," the man said. "But I have read about it. I know the whole story. I know you were unlucky enough to run into some very... unpleasant individuals."

"Unlucky?" Joyce mocked.

"Dr. Brenner, for example," the man said, not responding to her.

"From everything I've read he was the worst kind of man to be running a research agency. He caused a lot of harm. But he's gone now, and everyone who worked closely with him. That's not who we are. We're the good guys, Mrs. Byers. You might not want to believe it, but we're not the kind of people who keep a child in the basement of Hawkins Lab and try to turn her into a weapon against the Russians. Those people are gone."

"Tell me another story," Joyce said. "Maybe I'll believe that one."

"I'm telling you the truth," he said. "I'm from small-town America, just like you. I joined the army, because I wanted to serve, and then I got picked up to work for this agency. We do good work, Mrs. Byers. We protect people. We watch for potential threats. And sometimes, we have to clean up messes. I really hope this isn't going to turn into a huge mess. That's not what either of us want, is it?"

"Are you going to bring in your taser or a truth serum or something?" Joyce asked. "Because I'm not going to help you."

The man pushed back from the table and dug his fingers into this temples. Joyce felt pretty good to see him get stressed out. With a heavy sigh, he got up from the table and walked over to unplug the security camera.

"Is that supposed to scare me?" Joyce scoffed. "You don't want them to see what you're going to do to make me talk?"

"No, Mrs. Byers, it's because they don't have the clearance to hear what I'm going to tell you," he said, his voice sounding more tired that it had before. "My team, and the agency I work for, are tracking a pyrokete, a firestarter. That's a human with the psychic ability to move fire with their mind. Move and create fire, I guess. We've dealt with them before. Not many of them, but they're almost always dangerous. Did you see Waco Texas on the news?"

Joyce glared down at the table. He was just trying to rattle her.

"Fire is a very unstable element, from what we understand. It's very hard for a person to control, so even a person who isn't malicious is still dangerous. It's hard enough for a full grown man or woman to

control, but we're tracking a baby. As far as we know, a baby with really frightening powers and absolutely know control over them. I'm pretty sure that I saw this baby, with my own eyes, blow up a house not two miles from where you live."

Joyce looked up in surprise. She'd talked to Karen Wheeler on the phone that day. A little kitchen fire at Mike and El's house had gotten out of control. She knew that's what it was.

"Hmm. Do I have your attention now?" The man gloated. Joyce hated him for it, but she didn't look away this time. He went on. "You know all about Mrs. Wheeler, I assume. You know her as Eleven. I've read all the files that survived when Hawkins Lab was shut down. It seems she was very, very powerful. I'm guessing you've seen what she can do first hand. We don't know everything about psychic abilities. Our eggheads are working on that, but we do know it has a genetic component. The agency I work for was very aware that any child of "Subject Eleven" would carry the same genes. When that baby was brought home from the hospital a year ago, she was assigned a monitor. All we did was keep an eye on her, to make sure there was no danger. Passive surveillance. Nothing more. Most recently, I was that monitor, conducting surveillance on the Wheeler baby. I was outside their house when it exploded. Bright orange flames, as high as you could see. It scared me, Mrs. Byers. It should scare you, too."

She ground her jaw hard, glaring up at him as he leaned over her table.

"There are eight million people in the Chicagoland area. How big of a fire do you think one little girl can make? How many people can she incinerate if she gets scared and has an outburst? Nobody wants that. I'd bet even your son Will, and Mike and Eleven Wheeler don't want that. That's why I need you to trust me. I need you to help me find them."

The monster had his firestarter, and he was happy. Fire was powerful, and it was an ability he lacked himself. Often, in the time since he'd ceased being a man and had become something more, he'd wished he could do more. The abilities he did posses were impressive, to those with no abilities, but he always craved more. He

always wished for more power.

He always wished for more power. He had witnessed other abilities that he did not posses. Fire, of course, was one of those. He had also known people who could create life-like illusions in the minds of others. He had known people who, with nothing but a picture, could view anyone at all from anywhere in the world. He had even known people who could see into the past and future. Those were not his own abilities. Once the scientists in a Soviet lab had done whatever-it-was they had done to him, his abilities had manifested themselves, and he had slowly learned to control them. They were impressive. But they weren't enough. He always wished for more.

If he couldn't control the fire himself, at least he could control the one who could control the fire. The two of them walked through the prison together. There was no outward sign that the firestarter was not acting of his own free will. A few prisoners in their orange coveralls crossed his path. The monster pushed his way into their minds and they turned to walk ahead of him. A little further down the corridor, he came upon a few more prisoners, and took them under his influence as well. They moved together through the prison like some sort of funeral procession, or perhaps like an honor guard. Sometimes the monster took pleasure in dominating the minds of others, but these common criminals were very uninteresting to him. He would use them like ants as long as it suited him, but he wouldn't gain any enjoyment from it.

His mind strayed to his future plans. He had one firestarter, and he knew of another. His dreams had shown him where she was. As far as he could tell, she might be even more powerful than the one he already possessed. Dominating people such as those DID bring him enjoyment.

Much later than he expected, a squad of prison guards showed up to block his path. The monster assumed that they had finally caught on to the spontaneous prison break and were in the process of locking the place down. He could have pushed himself into the minds of these few prison guards, as well, but instead he set his own thralls to fight them. He stood back to watch the melee take place, still a little bored. It had been relatively easy to slip into the prison undetected, but now that he had his prize, he was growing tired of skulking and

hiding.

Even as his orange clad thralls wrestled with the small group of prison guards, he heard more approaching, their boots pounding against the prison's tile floors. The monster grew restless. He was eager to see what his new prize could really do. He turned to look at the firestarter, who still stood next to him, passively waiting, and issued his wordless instructions. The man took a few steps toward the prison guards. Bright orange flames erupted from his hands.

Walter stirred slightly in his sleep. It was still light outside, but he often dozed off a few times during the day. It put him in his most receptive state and opened his inner eye to whatever his subconscious wanted to show him. Aside from that, he had been given little else to do by the annoyingly idealistic Agent Jack Smith. The younger man seemed to be holding a grudge against Walter for going over his head with the information about the Wheeler child, and had sidelined him from the mission. That was only annoying, not upsetting. Walter had dealt with much worse. Over his many years since coming to this country, he'd negotiated his way around countless politicians, agents, functionaries, and bureaucrats. It usually wasn't difficult to manipulate them. His dreams gave him knowledge that very few others had, and knowledge was power.

His eyes began to dart rapidly under his eyelids. His breathing quickened. His hands clenched and unclenched on their own. His minds eye began to show him things.

Fire.

Walter saw a man, burning brighter than the sun, standing at the epicenter of a whirling storm of flames. He saw men in uniforms and men in orange jumpsuits engulfed in the flames, screaming in agony as their clothes burned and their skin melted. Then he saw a parking lot, packed with cars, outside of a shopping mall. The cars were burning, just like the men he had seen. So was the pavement. So were the buildings. He was on fire.

Walter was burning.

He felt the unbearable heat searing his skin. He screamed and thrashed around, trying to put the flames out.

His eyes shot open and he sat up in bed, still screaming and slapping at the flames that were no longer there. It was several long seconds before he realized he was safe in his little room, alone and untouched by fire, real or imagined.

He sat there, his heart hammering in his chest, as he tried to catch his breath. Images of the fire, almost as real as in his dreams, danced behind his eyes.

Walter threw his blanket off and stepped into his shoes as he stumbled toward the door. He grabbed the first agent he found by the man's shirt collar and demanded to know where Smith was. The crazed look in his eyes must have been enough to forestall any arguments and break through protocols. The agents took him to a closed door where two other agents stood guard. They told him to wait until Smith was ready to come talk to him. Walter pushed past them and yanked the door open. He was old, but he was determined. He found Smith inside, sitting across from a woman with a pack of cigarettes and an open file folder on the table. Smith looked up in surprise. Walter felt completely justified interrupting the man in the middle of whatever he was doing.

"He's coming here," Walter said, almost tripping over his tongue. "The Russian is coming here, to Chicago!"

El had stopped eyeing every vine and every crumbling building in the Upside Down with fear and apprehension. It had taken a few minutes, but she'd mostly gotten over hear initial fears. Seeing that dark and decaying world had brought back memories of her childhood, of the first time she'd ever seen the demogorgon, of the first time she'd seen Will, from a great distance, trapped in the that unhappy place, of the brief time she herself had been trapped there, after fighting the demogorgon. She'd been a girl then, and as afraid of that creature as any little girl would be afraid of a growling, barking dog. She wasn't a little girl anymore, and she knew there were worse things in the world than hungry creatures. Shady government agencies, for example.

After the first few minutes, her fear had begun to ebb away. The old, unhappy memories, triggered by the cold and dark Upside Down world around her, didn't go away, but they did lose some of their life. She started to look back at them, from a distance of ten years, instead of living in them. Those things were in her past. They'd been terrible at the time, but they'd given way to much better things. She slid even closer to Mike and the baby as they walked.

"Is this how it looked before? When you were here?" Mike asked.

El nodded.

"I wonder how it got like this," he said, shifting Allie to his other arm.

El considered that. She hadn't really thought about it before. The Upside Down was just a bad place, to her. There were other bad places, like the bottom of the ocean, or the middle of a burning desert, or Hawkins lab. She had just always tried to spend her time in good places, when she could help it. But, now that she thought about it, maybe the Upside Down hadn't always looked the way it looked now.

A sudden wave of danger sense overwhelmed El.

It hit her as hard as if someone had shoved her from behind. She jerked her head around to look at Mike and the baby a tiny fraction of a second before things started happening.

Mike's eyes and mouth snapped open in a look of silent shock as his shirt started to catch fire. El instinctively pulled Allie out of his arms and toward her, but she had to stop in mid air. El's brain tried to catch up, but her instincts were quick enough to keep her from pulling a ball of fire into her arms. She wasn't fireproof anymore than Mike was.

She floated Allie a few feet away from herself and Mike as bright orange flames began to dance around the baby, emanating from her skin in all directions. Dustin pushed past El and jumped on his friend, slapping at the Mike's shirt to put the flames out.

El stood there, frozen, though every muscle in her body was

screaming for her to move. Caught between her heart's desire to reach out and grab her child, and the awareness that she simply couldn't do that, she hovered, as if on the edge of a cliff. At the very least, Allie didn't seem to be hurt. The fire had already burned off her little clothes, but it did nothing to her own skin. She was upset, though. She screamed at the top of her tiny lungs, which was another punch in the gut for El. Her hands moved with a mind of their own, reaching out to grab Allie so that El could hold her to her heart and rock her in her arms and comfort her, but she couldn't do it.

Instead, as the ball of flames around the baby grew larger, El had to float Allie even a little further away. The heat on her face was becoming almost unbearable. He eyes watered, and her hair fluttered in the artificial breeze.

Mike separated himself from Dustin, his shirt no longer burning, and leaped toward El and the baby. She made sure to give him a gentle psychic shove, just in case he decided to act on the same crazy impulse that she felt and tried to jump into the fire to grab the baby himself.

The ball of flames grew even larger, and it began to incinerate the decaying, slimy vines that crisscrossed the mall parking lot. El heard the vines hiss, and then actually scream. They writhed and coiled, more like snakes than vines, and continued to give off a piercing shriek. She had to float Allie even farther away as the fireball expanded, to keep it from engulfing her and her friends. Mike came up to her shoulder and clutched her hand tightly. Dustin and Will hung back behind them, shielding their faces against the oppressive heat. El's hair and clothes were flapping in the growing heat-wind. The fireball only continued to expand.

"El," Mike said, needing to yell over the roaring of the flames.

She turned her head to stare into his eyes. They were wide with fear, just like hers. "Mike," she said, no other words coming to her mind. She squeezed his hand harder. The fireball continued to grow.

9. Chapter 9

This chapter is a lot shorter than the previous ones, because I realize that I've been writing 10,000 word chapters and making you guys wait forever between chapters. So I'm trying to split them up a little more and get them out to you quicker. The next one is nearly finished already, so I should have it up in just a few days. Thanks for reading. Please let me know what you think.

Chapter 9

The second that Allie stopped producing flames, El drew her back through the air. It was a considerable distance, since she had needed to float the baby farther and farther and farther away to keep from being consumed by the fire. Both Mike and El stood up from behind the car they'd used for shelter, agonizing over each second that passed before they could touch their baby again.

She dropped softly into El's arms, and the two of them smothered the little girl with their embrace. Even if Mike hadn't been crying for her, his eyes were tearing up against the stinging heat all around them. Allie seemed to have cried herself out, and was now only quietly sobbing in her mother's arms. Mike felt as helpless, as useless, as it was possible to be. All he and El could do was stand around at the edge of the flames while Allie went through whatever nightmare or episode or whatever had caused the fiery outburst. The two of them clung to the baby in silence for a long time, miserably wishing they knew how to make it all stop.

"Is it over?" Dustin asked, coming up behind them. Mike lifted his head from El's shoulder and turned to see Dustin and Will returning. The two of them had done the smart thing and retreated even farther from the epicenter of the firestorm. Dustin had tried to drag Mike to safety with him, but Mike had refused to release his iron grip on El's arm as the two of them had watched Allie from afar as she burned up the place.

Mike nodded in answer to Dustin's question and wiped his eyes. "I think she's mostly calmed down. At least she isn't making fire

anymore."

"What happened?" Dustin asked, nervously moving a little closer to Allie. Mike could only come up with an empty stare. He had no idea what had caused the outburst.

"Wow," Will said, staring out over the swath of burning terrain. Mike turned to follow his gaze. It was a sight to behold. Those slimy, disturbing tentacle-vines were burning. The empty cars were burning. The mall was burning. The very pavement itself was burning. This fire looked to Mike somehow worse than the one that had consumed his house in a few short minutes. Wooden houses burned. That made sense to him. Here, things were burning that shouldn't have been.

Up until then, his eyes and ears had switched to a kind of tunnel vision for Allie, and he hadn't paid attention to much else. As the moment began to pass away, Mike became aware of a new sound. Over the roaring of the flames, he began to notice the piercing screams that came from those vines as they writhed and died in the fire.

"Is it safe to move Allie yet?" Dustin asked, breaking into Mike's thoughts.

"I don't think there's much of a choice," Mike said slowly, looking down at the baby again. "We can't stay here. We just have to hope it's out of her system for now. I don't know what else to do. We'll move a little farther away from the mall to make sure we're away from the agents, then Will can bring us back." He felt a little unsure even as he said the words. It might have been lucky that Allie had her outburst in the Upside Down. If they'd still been in the real world at the mall, she might have burned hundreds of people who were just going about their normal day. At least in the Upside Down, there was no one for her to hurt. He felt very nervous about bringing her back around crowds of people, although, for all he knew, the Upside Down itself had somehow caused Allie's episode. It was a problem, but he wasn't going to keep Allie in the Upside Down a second longer than he needed to, so the possible risk to the everyday people back in the real world was a risk he'd have to take.

"Do you think the people on the other side saw any of this?" Dustin

asked.

"Huh?" Mike asked, not following.

"Well when the demogorgon moved around in the Upside Down, it messed with lights and phones and things in Hawkins," Dustin reminded him. "This is a huge fire. Do you think it did anything to the other side? Do you think people noticed?"

"I don't know," Mike said, considering it. "Will?"

Will waved a hand at all the empty cars, some on fire, some still covered in vines. "Probably. I mean, there are a bunch of cars in the parking lot up there right now. They might be going crazy. Flashing lights. Honking horns. Car alarms..."

"Then we'd better get even farther away before we shift back," Mike concluded. "Are you ready to move, El?"

She looked up from quietly talking and humming to the baby and nodded in answer. Mike again stuck very close to her shoulder and to the baby as they moved out. He knew there was nothing he could do to help. There was nothing he knew how to do to keep Allie from having another episode, or to make things better when it happened again, but he stayed close anyway.

Hopper scowled out the window of his truck as he sat parked at a gas station a few blocks away from Will's house. In the seat next to him, Sam peered through binoculars.

"I see two of them parked across the street," Sam narrated as he scanned the area. "There's movement inside the house, too. I make out at least two people who walked past the window. That white Honda parked out front. Is that Will's car?"

"Yep," Hopper said darkly.

"I doubt they're keeping Will inside the house, though," Sam said. "If they're holding him for some reason, it makes more sense that they'd take him back to wherever they come from. If they're still here, it probably means they're hoping to catch people who come looking for

will."

"Like Joyce, maybe," Hopper agreed.

"Just who are these guys, Hop?" Sam asked, putting down the binoculars. "What are we up against? What did you get into ten years ago?"

"Government types," Hopper shrugged. "I never knew who they were. NSA. CIA. Men in Black, I don't know. I don't think hardly anyone knows who they are. That's the point."

"If we're going to outsmart them, we need to know who they are and what they want," Sam pressed. "Otherwise we're walking around blind."

"Maybe somebody can tell us a few things," Hopper thought out loud. "Do you know anyone on the Chicago PD?"

Mike blinked his eyes as he stared up at the clear blue sky. It was amazing how good the sun felt on his skin after spending time in the cold and dark of the Upside Down.

"We should radio Lucas now," Dustin said, already taking the device out of his pocket.

The baby seemed not to notice the transition back to the proper world. Mike huddled close to El and watched Allie's face very carefully. She was back to her calm and happy self at last, nestled against El's arms, listening to her mother's unspoken comfort. It was almost possible to imagine that a little while ago she hadn't been burning up everything around her.

"Was it just the Upside Down that made her do it?" Mike asked in a quiet voice.

"Maybe," El said. "Maybe I got distracted. Maybe there's something else. I think there is."

"Yes, Dustin, I copy. Where have you guys been?" Lucas' voice came over Dustin's radio. Mike was barely listening, still caught up in his

concern for Allie.

"Don't worry about that now," Dustin said into the radio. "Is this channel still safe?"

"They could be monitoring all the airwaves," Lucas said. "We can't be sure."

"In that case, meet us..." Dustin thought for a minute.

Will sprang to his side. "Meet us where we can all save Princess Daphne," he said with a conspiratorial grin. Dustin looked at him sideways, but Will gave him a reassuring nod. "Ok... Lucas, you know where that would be?"

"I'll find the place," Lucas told him. "Wait for me there, and don't use the radio unless you have to. Over and out."

Dustin cocked his head at Will. "There's an arcade nearby, I take it?"

"Yep," Will said. "It was better than maybe giving away our location over an open channel.

Mike listened to the whole exchange with half an ear as he looked in the direction of the mall, which wasn't really visible from the several blocks distance that they'd put between themselves and the mall before leaving the Upside Down. He didn't see a plume of smoke rising into the air, and he didn't hear fire truck sirens, so he assumed that Allie's fire had been contained to the Upside Down, and hadn't translated over into the normal world. That made him feel a little better, at least. He also didn't see any black sedans or white vans creeping around near by, which made him feel even better, but it didn't mean they weren't just around the corner, about to pounce.

"Mike, did you hear me?" Dustin asked, shaking Mike out of his thoughts.

"Sorry, yeah, we're ready to go. Lead the way, Will," Mike said.

"Actually, we should take a quick detour," Dustin told him. "We won't blend in looking like this," he waved a hand at Mike's shirt, which was burned black in places and had a few holes in it. Mike looked

down and also noticed that his shoes and the knees of his pants were covered with the black mold-stuff that grew all over the Upside Down. The same was true for El. Will and Dustin were even more covered with the stuff.

"We don't want random people to remember seeing us," Dustin told him. "We need to steal or buy some new clothes."

"We still have a little money," Will said. "Let's not start stealing things yet."

"Survival, guys," Dustin said. "You do what you have to when your back's against the wall."

Hopper brought his truck to a stop in the little alleyway behind Joe's Pizza. He could smell the over-filled trash cans.

He and Sam stepped out of the truck and approached the single squad car that was also parked in the alley. "Lou," Sam greeted him, as they came up to the open driver's side window. "Thanks for coming down here."

"Sam," the Chicago cop replied with a nod. "Who's this?"

"This is Hop, an old buddy of mine from the Indianapolis PD," Sam told him.

"You still on the force?" Lou asked.

"I'm retired," Hopper said.

"Listen, we have a friend who's gone missing," Sam said, getting right to the point. "That's why I need your help."

"Missing?" Lou asked. "Did you report it?"

"That's what I'm worried about," Sam told him. "I've seen a couple of Black Suits running around. Do you know anything about that?"

"You're missing friend is caught up in that?" Lou asked, alarm showing on his face.

"Caught up... kind of," Sam allowed.

"That's not good, Sam," the cop said. "Is it a close friend? Cause my suggestion is to stay out of this whole thing."

"So you do know about the Black Suits?" Sam asked.

"Not much," Lou told him. "The Chief called us all downtown for a meeting the other day. Told us about our guests. Some kind of agents. We're supposed to help if they ask for it, but otherwise stay out of their way, and not ask any questions."

"You don't know who they are?" Hopper interrupted. "CIA? NSA?"

"That's above my pay grade," Lou said with a half joking shrug. "I'd tell you if I knew. Whoever they are, they're official enough to come in here and do whatever they want, but secret enough that they don't have to tell us grunts who they are."

"You haven't talked to any of them?" Sam asked.

"Nope," Lou said. "They haven't asked for anything yet, so it's business as usual, unless they decide to call us in as reinforcements on whatever they're working on. Maybe they're looking for Russian spies or something. Maybe the president's daughter's been kidnapped. I don't know. I think they're looking for people. And if your... friend is mixed up in all that... I'm sorry."

Mike and the others sat together at a table in the corner of the little arcade Will had led them to. The place sold snacks, so Dustin had ordered them a basket of cheesy fries so that they had an excuse to hang out at the arcade without playing the games. After waiting for what felt like years, Lucas showed up and casually slid into a chair at their table.

"Was it hard to find the place?" Dustin asked, around a mouth full of cheesy fries.

"I just found a group of skater kids and asked them if there was an arcade nearby," Lucas told him. "Is everyone OK?" He looked at each of them in turn. "New clothes?"

"We had to stop and buy some," Dustin explained. "Our old clothes were... Will, can I tell him, or are you going to?"

Will shrugged his shoulders, looking down at the table.

"You sure? OK," Dustin said to Will, then turned back to Lucas. "We went into the Upside Down."

"What?" Lucas said, then realized he'd spoken a lot louder than he'd meant to. He glanced around the arcade, but no one way paying attention to them.

"It was intense," Dustin said, his eyes lighting up. "The place is just as nasty as Will always told us."

"How did that happen?" Lucas asked. "Is there another gate?" He leaned in a whispered. "Is the demogorgon back?"

"Nonono," Dustin said, waving his hand dismissively. "OK, hold on to your chair. Are you ready for this? Will is a planeswalker."

Lucas's eyebrows went up.

"Yeah, he can go into the Upside Down whenever he wants," Dustin said. "He's been able to ever since-"

"That's how you got away from the agents?" Lucas asked.

"Yep. We walked out right under their noses," Dustin said proudly.

"It's safe to go down there?" Lucas asked, his face growing concerned.

"We didn't run into anything," Dustin told him. "But there's more." He glanced over at Mike for permission, who waved his hand for Dustin to go on.

"Allie had another... episode," Dustin said, leaning closer to Lucas so he could keep his voice down. "It was intense. I've never seen so much fire. If there was a demogorgon around, she would have taken the thing out, no problem."

"This is crazy," Lucas said. "And we still don't know what's causing

it?"

"Not really," Dustin said, looking at Mike. "Kind of unpredictable. It could have been some effect from the Upside Down, I guess, but..."

"We have to figure it out," Lucas said. "We could probably slip out of the city right now before the agents catch up to us... but if Allie has another episode, sorry Mike, they'll just find us again."

"Will..." came a voice from somewhere. "Will, can you hear me?"

"What the-" Dustin began.

Lucas jumped, then seemed to catch on. He unclipped a radio from his belt and placed it on the table.

"Will, are you there?" Came the static filled voice over the radio. The group stared down at it.

"Where'd that come from?" Dustin asked.

"I took it off one of the agents," Lucas explained.

"Will, if you're there, I need you to answer me," came the voice again. Will stared around at everyone else at the table.

"Mom?" Will said to them. "What's she doing on the agent's radio?"

"Oh no," Dustin said, his face falling. "They must have captured her."

"Will," Joyce said again.

He reached out to pick the radio up off the table, but Lucas stopped him.

"Careful. It might be a trap," Lucas said.

"If the agents do have her, we need to hear what she has to say," Mike told them. "Maybe she can secretly tell us where they're holding her and we can go break her out."

Glancing at everyone around the table one last time, Will picked up the radio and pressed the talk button. "Mom? I'm here."

"Oh, Will, honey, are you alright?" Joyce said, sounding relieved.

"We're fine, mom. We're all fine. Where... where are you?" Will asked.

"Listen to me, sweetie, you won't like this, but I need you to trust me," she said. "I'll explain everything when I see you but... You need to meet with this man."

Will stared across the table at Mike, his jaw falling open.

"His name is Smith, if that's his real name, but he needs to meet with you. Well, with Mike and El, really. I know it sounds crazy, but this isn't a trap. They aren't forcing me to call you. You really need to hear what Smith has to say.

Will and Mike stared at each other, each shaking their heads in disbelief.

"Are you still there? Will? Listen, I need you to trust me. I'm using password Radagast. Do you hear me, Will? Password Radagast."

10. Chapter 10

Chapter 10

Lucas peered through his binoculars as a single black sedan came to a stop on the road below. He was perched on the rooftop of an old abandoned warehouse, which he and the others had chosen (after MUCH debate) as the location of their parlay with this so-called Agent Smith.

He was still very much not OK with the idea. The whole thing seemed like a trap to him, though he couldn't in a million years picture Joyce betraying them. After protesting the meeting, and being outvoted, he had resolved to make the meeting take place with as little risk as possible. He put down his binoculars and dug out Dustin's home made radio.

"They're here," Lucas said into the radio.

"Copy that," Dustin came back immediately. Then Lucas pulled out the other radio, the one he'd taken from the agents, and spoke into that one.

"That's close enough," he said into the radio, presumably to the man who called himself Smith. "Step out of the car, and make sure I can see Joyce with you." Lucas picked up the binoculars again and nervously swept the street in both directions as far as his rooftop vantage point allowed him to see. Smith had promised to come alone, and Lucas didn't see any other cars approaching. Not yet, anyway.

Down on the street, the black car's doors opened. A man in a suit and sunglasses stepped out of the drivers side. Lucas was relieved to see Joyce step out of the passenger side. She wasn't handcuffed, and she hadn't even been made to ride in the back like a prisoner. Maybe he didn't need to worry so much.

"Open your jacket," Lucas said into the agent's radio. "I want to see you leave your gun in the car."

"Is this really necessary?" So-called-Smith said into his own radio.

Lucas could see him looking around the street and at the windows of the abandoned warehouse, but he felt well hidden. It was an abandoned warehouse, after all, and there was plenty of trash and junk lying around. Lucas had piled some of it up around himself to make a nice hiding place.

"I say it's necessary," Lucas told him over the radio. "If you don't want to cooperate, I could always have El drop that car on your head, and then we grab Joyce and make a clean getaway."

"No need to be sarcastic," Smith said. "I didn't come here to shoot anyone." He did cooperate, though. He spread his suit jacket wide open so that Lucas, through the binoculars, could see his shoulder holster. Smith then made a show of pulling his pistol out and putting it back in the car. "Happy?" He asked.

"Now give the radio to Joyce," Lucas said. "I'll talk to her from now on." With very visible reluctance, the agent handed the radio to Joyce.

"Are you sure you're alright, Mrs Byers?" Lucas asked. "I could shoot the agent in the leg while you run. We'll help you get away."

"Thanks, Lucas, but no," she said. "I really mean it. I think you need to hear what he has to say."

"Alright," Lucas said with a sigh. "We'll bring you inside. Tell Smith there to put his hands on his head and walk toward the front door. Slowly."

Lucas was fairly sure that Joyce would have been able to slip in some sort of danger code word or call for help if she'd wanted to, so he began to let himself hope that the whole thing wasn't a trap. He was also getting a sneaking feeling that he'd seen so-called-Smith before. Maybe it was the voice. Lucas used the binoculars again, but he was pretty far above them, and he couldn't get a good view of the man's face.

The two of them on the street neared the massive steel loading door at the front of the warehouse. The thing slid open with rusty creaks and groans, courtesy of El. A moment later, Lucas saw Smith jerked

off his feet by an invisible hand and pulled inside.

Mike watched the man in the black suit zoom through the air, his toes almost brushing the dusty ground as his legs dangled, inside their abandoned warehouse. El pinned him up against a wall with his arms at his side.

"Mom," Will called, running past Mike's shoulder.

"Will," Joyce said, rushing up and hugging him. "I was so worried about you."

"No, mom, we're fine, we're fine," Will said. "It's you we were worried about. Did they hurt you?"

"No," she said, looking around the room at Dustin, Mike, the baby in his arms, and El. "But I think we all need to be calm and listen to what he has to say."

El let the heavy entry door slam shut. Dustin pushed past Mike to shine a flashlight in Smith's eyes.

"Who are you, and who do you work for?" Dustin demanded.

"Agent Smith," the man said. "And get that out of my face."

"Your real name," Dustin insisted, holding the flashlight menacingly.

"Jack Smith," he said. "That is a real name, you know."

"If you say so," Dustin said. "Why are you chasing little Allie? What do you want with her."

"Listen to me, hot shot," Smith said to Dustin. "I'm gonna tell you everything. That's why I came here. No tricks. So do we really need all of this? The flashlight, the guy up on the rooftop, and..." he struggled against El's invisible grip for a second "...this?"

"We'll be the judge of that," Dustin said. "You just answer our questions, and hope we decide to show mercy."

"Tone it down a little, big guy," Smith said.

"Why ARE you chasing us," Mike interrupted, squeezing Allie a little tighter in his arms, as if he was afraid Smith might run off with her right there.

"Protective custody," Smith said. "For your own safety, and everyone else's."

"You mean you want to lock her in a cell!" Mike said.

"How about a fireproof room?" Smith shot back at him. "A nice big room with a TV and teddy bears and flowers in vases and Disney characters on the carpets and, yes, fireproof walls? Look me in the eyes, Wheeler, and tell me your little girl isn't dangerous." His last word turned into a grunt as El increased the pressure on his chest.

Mike glared at him, holding Allie even tighter. "I know what you people are like," Mike said. "El spent her whole life a prisoner of people like you. That's never going to happen to Allie. Never!"

"God, Wheeler, we're not the bad guys," Smith said. "We observe, and we protect, and sometimes we miss something that we should have seen coming, and people die because of it. Your family aren't the only people with unnatural powers, you know. There are plenty of them out there, and they aren't all a happy little nuclear American family. Some of them are dangerous. Some of them are real monsters."

"So go and chase after them and leave us alone," Mike said angrily.

"Because you're not a threat, is that right?" Smith snapped. "You know how to flip a switch and turn off her powers so she doesn't burn your house down in the middle-" Smith's voice broke again as El pressed even tighter. "-of the-" he drew in another wheezing breath. "-night. And your wife here doesn't toss cars in the air when she gets angry? Right?"

"We were just protecting ourselves," Mike argued. "From you! I know what you're like."

"Different people," Smith wheezed. "Brenner and the others. That's not who we are."

"You want to lock a little girl in away in a cell. Sounds the same to me," Mike spat.

"You'd say the same thing if it was the other way around?" Smith demanded. "What if your little girl didn't have any special powers, but your neighbors did? Would you sleep at night knowing that they might burn down their house, your house, the whole block? The whole town? How would YOU like that?"

Mike wanted to argue, but he was having trouble finding the words. He wanted to throw something at the guy. He wanted El to toss him out of a window. Instead he just glared.

"You're getting sidetracked," Joyce spoke up from across the room where she still stood with Will. "Smith, that isn't what you came to talk to him about."

Smith breathed very heavily against El's restraining pressure, and, visibly calming himself down, spoke again. "I'm the least of your problems," Smith told them. "What I think is best for everyone is if you and your whole family moves into a lab where the eggheads and scientists can try to figure out a way to help your little girl, maybe find a way to control or shut off her powers, while we keep you all safe and comfortable-"

"We don't need help from you, thanks," Mike snapped.

"-But since you won't listen to me," Smith went on, uninterrupted. "Then you need to run. As far as you can."

Mike continued to glare at him, not sure where Smith was going now.

"You, your wife, your kid, if you won't let us put you somewhere safe, then you need to get out of here. Get as far away as you can, because there's something coming after you."

"Is it a demogorgon?" Dustin interrupted.

"A what?" Smith asked.

"What are you talking about?" Mike asked Smith, bringing his attention back from Dustin.

Smith hesitated for a brief moment. "Understand, all of you, that I'm breaking all the laws by telling you this. The agency I work for, our job is to monitor these things. We're always watching, on the lookout for things like this. There's a man, or a monster, or something. We first caught sight of him in Russia. We're pretty sure the Soviets made him in a lab, or turned one of their soldiers into something else. When the Soviets collapsed, he got out, and he's been running around for the last couple years. He's very hard to track. We usually only know where he's been, because he leaves a trail of bodies behind him. We spend a lot of time cleaning up supernatural crime scenes so the local police don't catch on to anything. At first, we thought he was tracking down individuals with psychic abilities and killing them. When several people on our Watch List ended up dead, we tightened down on security. Some of these people were just average American families who tried to keep their special talents a secret, a lot like your family before the big fire happened. When they started being targeted, we invited some of them into protective custody. Others we put under closer supervision, put agents in place to protect them if the Russian monster showed up at their doorstep one day. You see? We aren't the bad guys."

Mike looked away angrily.

"But things have changed now," Smith went on. "We have intelligence that the Russian is working with another firestarter, and they're coming here to Chicago. I can only guess they're coming here for you."

"Another Pyrokete?" Dustin asked.

"And not a good one," Smith told him. "This one's responsible for a string of fires and murders in California. I told you, firestarters are dangerous."

"You think they're coming here because they want to find us?" Mike asked skeptically.

"Why else would they come here, now?" Smith replied. "Now the Russian knows about you, you seem to have moved up to the top of his list."

"Why would he care about us?" Mike asked.

"I don't know," Smith said. "Why did the Commies invade other countries? Why do lions eat zebras? He kills other psychics. That's what he does. So I suggest you either take the help I'm offering you, or get as far away as you can."

Mike heard the warehouse's rusty old metal staircase creak as someone hurried down it. He turned to see Lucas, coming back down from his rooftop post.

"Smitty!" Lucas called in surprise. "It's you!"

Mike's head whirled around as he looked from Lucas to Smith and back again.

"Sinclair?" Smith said, straining against El's grip to turn and look at Lucas. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"What are YOU doing here?" Lucas replied, moving off the staircase and past Will and Joyce. "You have a beard now. Wow, it's been about..."

"Four years," Smith told him.

"You just disappeared," Lucas said.

"I got picked up by... an agency," Smith said. "All top secret, and stuff. I couldn't tell anyone where I went or what I was doing. I had to basically cut off all my friends."

Lucas pushed his way past Mike and placed himself between Smith and El. She was staring daggers at the prisoner, and had been since she'd pulled him through the door. Lucas moved his head right into her eye line so that she had to look at him.

"El, he's a friend," Lucas said in a calming voice. "This is Smitty. We were in the Army together. You don't have to crush him."

"You weren't here just now, Lucas," Mike said. "You didn't hear what he was saying about Allie. He'd take her away to a lab if we let him."

"OK, maybe. I didn't hear him," Lucas said, still holding eye contact with El as he spoke to Mike. "But you don't have to hurt him. He can't do anything to us here. Allie's safe for now. There's a bunch of us and only one of him and, El, listen to me El, you know he wouldn't make it five feet before you could splatter him all over the floor if he tried anything stupid, so why don't you let him go? El? Please, you can trust him. It's OK."

El narrowed her eyes and continued to star for a long moment. Then, as if letting out a breath she'd been holding the whole time, she relaxed her body and took a step away. Smith dropped the couple inches that he'd been held above the floor and took a big, easy breath for the first time since he'd been pinned to the wall.

"Thanks, El," Lucas said.

"Thanks, Sinclair," Smith said. "How'd you get mixed up with these people?"

"These are my friends," Lucas told him. "You knew I'm from Hawkins, didn't you?"

"You probably told me, but I don't remember it. There's not much to remember about Hawkins. You can barely find it on a map," Smith said.

"Really?" Lucas protested.

Smith shrugged.

"You should tell him your story again," Dustin said to Smith. "You missed a lot while you were upstairs, Lucas."

"Tell him whatever you want," Mike told Smith sharply. "We still aren't going anywhere with you. And certainly not to some new Hawkins Lab."

Smith took Lucas by the arm and walked a few steps away and began making his case again. Mike turned his back on them and went over to El.

"What do you think?" He asked her. "Does this Russian monster mean

anything to you?" El shook her head slowly, a thoughtful look on her face.

Joyce, Will, and Dustin migrated closer to them, seemingly eager to hear them confer about the information, away from Smith's ears.

"Mike, El, is it true? About the fire at your house?" Joyce asked, looking down at Allie with the same expression on her face that Mike had seen when Will was missing in the Upside Down.

"It's true," Mike told her quietly. "I mean, not what Smith just said, but... kind of. Sometimes she starts fires. Huge, powerful fires. El and I don't know what makes her do it, or how to stop it." Mike watched Joyce's face as she continued to regard the baby. He saw that El was watching Joyce, too.

Joyce frowned as she considered something. "That other person Smith talked about..." she began slowly. "The one who starts fires. The one from California. Maybe this is crazy but, what if they're connected somehow?"

"Wow," Dustin shouted, smacking himself in the forehead with his palm. "How did I not think of that?"

"It's not crazy?" Joyce asked him.

"It makes perfect sense," Dustin said, speaking fast. "Mike, of course two people with the same power set would share some kind of connection."

"They would?" Mike asked.

"You notice that El always knows just before Allie is about to... use her powers? So Allie must be producing some kind of psychic signal that El picks up. She gets really upset before she starts a fire, right? It's an emotional power. So El can feel it, like a change in the air pressure before a storm, because they share a connection, obviously, because she's her mom."

"Ok..." Mike said, "...But I don't get the other-"

"So this other Pyrokete in California, if his powers are the same as

Allie's he would send out a psychic signal whenever he creates a firestorm too, right?" Dustin went on.

"Maybe..."

"Fire is an emotional power, remember? So that guy probably gets really angry before he uses his powers. And Allie can feel it, because they're connected, because they're kind of the same," Dustin said, his excitement growing. "So El can feel Allie, but she can't feel the other Pyrokete guy, because he and El don't share any kind of connection. But whenever he blows up, Allie feels it, and it effects her. Since she's only a baby, she doesn't know how to block it out or anything, so she blows up too."

"I don't know..." Mike said.

"Think about it," Dustin insisted. "You're holding Allie right now. If you started yelling and crying, she'd pick up on it get upset and probably start doing the same thing as you. Babies are really influenced by the people around them. So if Allie feels "FIRE" in her brain, and she doesn't know what it means or where it comes from, but it overwhelms her and she starts a fire of her own without even knowing why she's doing it."

"I don't know," Mike said again. "You think Allie can feel what someone is doing from two thousand miles away?"

"Only him, because they're the same," Dustin explained. "And why would psychic powers be limited by distance? El could spy on Russians, and that's like FIVE thousand miles."

"So you think Allie... has an episode every time this other firestarter uses his powers?" Mike asked, still feeling skeptical.

"Probably not every time," Dustin answered. "There are probably a lot of other factors. How big of a fire is he creating? Some would be a lot more powerful than others, depending on what he's doing. And then there's Allie. Is she awake? Is she asleep? It seems like she's more vulnerable to it when she's asleep. Is she happy, or upset? She'd probably be more vulnerable to it if she's already upset, like when we're running from the agents and Allie can pick up that we're all

stressed out and scared. And then there's El. Maybe when El is touching Allie's mind, it's like the phone line is busy. Another signal can't come in if Allie's mind is already receiving something from El, especially if she's receiving happy thoughts. And then there's the Upside Down. Maybe psychic signals travel easier in the Upside Down than it our world, so that's why Allie had an episode there. Just theories. There are probably a bunch of variables behind what's going on.

Mike stared at Dustin, thinking. He didn't hate it. He didn't love the idea of some unknown, probably dangerous person a whole country away influencing his little girl's mind, but the theory made sense to him, as Dustin laid it out.

"What do you think, El?" Dustin asked her. "Sound plausible?"

Mike watched her face as she considered it. After a long time, she agreed. "Plausible," she said. Dustin's smile almost split his face in two.

"So what does that mean for us?" Will asked.

"It means, if we can find away to stop that other Pyrokete, or break the connection, maybe we can calm down Allie's powers and make them easier for her to control. Maybe it would be the end of her episodes," Dustin said.

"Uh... give us just a second, guys," Mike said to the others as he pulled El away from the group so they could talk quietly. "What do you think about that stuff Smith said? Not the first part, I mean the running away stuff."

She watched him talk, and listened, but Mike couldn't read her expression.

"Maybe we SHOULD run, El," he said, keeping his voice low. "Just get Allie somewhere safe. Anywhere the agents and these other psychics and everyone can't find her." His voice trembled just a little as he spoke. He searched her face, hoping to find the easy answer to their problem.

She reached out and took his hand in both of hers. "No," she said softly. "Mike, our friends live here. WE live here. No more running. We fight."

"El," he pleaded, his eyes starting to fill up with tears. "If we stay, if anything happens to Allie, or you, I couldn't... I can't..." His voice caught. "I couldn't live after that. I don't need my job at Hawkins Middle. I don't need money or a house. I just need you."

"Mike," she said, her own eyes starting to water. "We fight. Together."

He tried to talk again, but his voice wouldn't work. He leaned forward and hugged her tightly, careful of Allie sandwiched between them. With his chin on her shoulder, Mike was looking back toward his friends. Their faces were blurry through the tears now falling from his eyes. "I don't know how we fight them," Mike said, his chin still on her shoulder.

"Me neither," she said, her own voice shaking now as much as his. "But we figure it out. Together."

Mike closed his eyes and just held on to El, wishing he didn't ever need to let go.

Will waited to give Mike and El a minute alone before he interrupted them. Mike was wiping his eyes. El was a little less self conscious about her own tears.

"Mike, if you guys are going to stay and fight," Will began carefully.

"You heard us?" Mike asked with a little nervous laugh.

Will rolled his eyes. "I already knew what you two were going to say. Sometimes your total obliviousness blows my mind. Anyway, if it's about to get really dangerous over here, I'd like to get my mom out first."

"No, of course," Mike said. "Do what you need to do. We'll be alright here."

"I'm coming back, Mike," Will insisted, looking hard into his eyes. "As

soon as I get my mom out of the city, I'm coming back for you guys. I won't let you fight this thing alone."

"El," Lucas interrupted gently, coming back over from his private talk with Smith. "Can you lift the door again? Smith said everything he came here to say. We should let him go now."

"We should we let you go? Are you going to stop chasing Allie?" Mike demanded, looking past Lucas' shoulder at Smith.

"I've got bigger problems than you right now, Wheeler," Smith told him. "I'm still in charger of this operation, which means it's my job to stop the Russian and the Firestarter. That takes priority."

"What about after that?" Mike asked.

"Well, if I mess this up, my boss will probably reassign me to work sanitation at a base in Alaska, so you won't ever have to see my face again. How's that sound?"

"You're going to try to stop those two psychics?" Dustin asked Smith incredulously. "With bullets?"

"That's right," Smith said.

"You don't know what you're getting into," Dustin told him.

"I know bullets," Smith countered.

"Bullets didn't work on the demogorgon," Dustin argued.

"The what?" Smith asked.

"I don't think you can deal with this on your own. Maybe you need El to help you," Dustin suggested. "What if we make a deal. El takes care of this little problem for you, and you agree to leave Allie alone for good."

"I think we can handle it, hot shot," Smith said. "You guys don't want to be anywhere near this. If you don't want to let us help YOU-"

"We don't," Mike interrupted.

"-Then I still say you should run. Just get as far away as you can." Smith started backing toward the door, maybe afraid that El wouldn't let him go, but she did. With a heavy groan of old rusty metal, the warehouse door slid open and Smith disappeared.

Hopper skidded to a stop and jumped out of his with Sam right on his heels. They looked frantically up and down the line of squad cars. Cops began shouting for them to leave, but Hopper ignored them as he searched up and down the line of parked cars and armed men. They had set up some kind of road block, arrayed as if they were waiting for Godzilla himself to come stomping down the street.

Sam grabbed Hopper's shoulder and pointed when he found the person they were looking for.

"Lou," Sam yelled over the noise of all the assembled cops. "What is all this?"

"What are you doing here, Sam?" Lou asked, stepping away from his own squad car, where he had been crouched behind his open driver's door like a shield.

"You first," Sam insisted. "What's going on here?"

"They called out everyone," Lou told him. "Chicago PD, fire department, SWAT, even the national guard is on their way."

"Who called you out?" Sam asked, gaping around at all the assembled men, trucks, and guns.

"The Suits," Lou told him. "They're running the show now. We're waiting for something. They still haven't told us what it is."

"You're expecting a shoot out?" Hopper asked, completely lost.

"Use your eyes," Lou snapped, waving his hand toward all the guns. "Now both of you need to get out of here. If we weren't all on the firing line, someone would have arrested you by now. Get somewhere safe. You don't want to be anywhere near whatever's about to happen."

Smith skidded to a stop behind the firing line, still yelling instructions into his radio as he got out.

"Where were you?" Agent Stoneman, who'd been in charge of the scene while he was gone, demanded.

"Never mind," Smith said. "Where's Walter?"

"This way," Stoneman said, taking him down the line.

"The National Guard units?"

"They're ten minutes out," Stoneman answered.

"Why did you move the timetable up so fast?" Smith asked.

"Because of Walter," Stoneman told him. "He came in and started raving at me. Said he had another dream. I'm glad you get to deal with him now."

They'd reached one of the many white vans, though this was was parked a short distance back from the firing line. Smith opened the door and found Walter inside, fidgeting nervously.

"Go make sure the army units get positioned right," Smith told Stoneman, who nodded and left. He turned back to look at Walter. "What did you see?"

"The Russian, and the Firestarter," Walter rasped at him. "I know where they're going to be. This road, right here."

"When?" Smith demanded.

"Right now. You almost missed it. Where were you?"

"Never mind," Smith said. "You're sure about this? It's a lot more detail than you usually give us."

"I'm sure," Walter growled.

"Is this from your same dream? The one about the fire?" Smith pressed.

"No, a different dream," Walter told him.

Smith turned to look back over his shoulder at the firing line that had been set up while he was away. He should have more than enough firepower to take down two individuals, if nothing went wrong.

"Alright, Walter, I want you to take this van and get a few blocks further back," Smith said, still looking at the firing line. "You're more valuable behind the lines, and I don't want to risk something happening to you up here."

A sudden cry of pain from Walter made Smith jerk his head around. He looked back into the van to see the older man, his back rigid and his neck held at an unnatural angle. His body spasmed, and he gave another cry of pain. Smith instinctively took a step toward him, as if to help.

"He knows," Walter hissed, his eyes going wide.

Smith stopped where he was and stared.

"He sensed me," Walter said, his neck muscles visibly straining and his eyes beginning to bulge.

"The Russian?" Smith asked, lifting and then dropping his hands, realizing that he was completely helpless against some kind of psychic attack.

"He caught me spying on him," Walter said, a trickle of blood starting to run from the corner of his eye. "He knows we're waiting for him. Get everyone away. Call off the-"

There was a loud snap, and Walter was jerked out of his seat, his neck flopping over sideways. He hung, suspended on his feet for a moment, and then crumpled to the floor, blood leaking out of both eyes and ears.

Smith was frozen for a few heartbeats. He had a hand on his gun, but there was no one around to shoot. He continued to stare down at the lifeless body for a few more heartbeats before a loud explosion snapped his attention back to the world outside.

11. Chapter 11

Author's Note: After more than a year, this story is back. I ran into a whole bunch of things this past year where I had no time to work on this, but it never left the back of my mind. I'm planning to finish this story out in the next couple of weeks (15 chapters, if my outline is correct), and then I've already started a second story (unrelated to this one, based on Season 2). So sorry for the long delay, and I hope you haven't forgotten what happened in the earlier chapters. Thanks so much for the comments!

Chapter 11

"I say we let them kill each other," Dustin said loudly. "That Smith guy has no idea what he's getting into. Maybe those scary psychics will take care of all the agents, and we won't have to worry about them anymore."

The seven of them, now including Joyce, headed down an industrial Chicago sidewalk, that abandoned warehouse now several blocks behind them.

"Then what if the psychics come looking for Allie?" Lucas countered.

"That's just what Smith told us," Dustin argued. "He was probably lying to get us to go along with him."

"He's a solid guy," Lucas grumbled.

"If you say so," Dustin said dismissively. "Still doesn't mean we can trust everything he says. We probably know more about psychics and stuff than him or anyone else from the government. We grew up with a real life superhero. So, whatever Smith says, we don't know for sure if Allie is in danger from anyone BUT the agents."

"So what do you think our best game plan is?" Mike asked him.

"I still say we leave the agents and the psychics alone for now. Let them blow each other up if they want to. When it's all over, if there's

anyone left who wants to get their filthy hands on little Allie, we deal with them then. I mean, we all support El while SHE deals with them. If we're really lucky, it won't even come to that."

"Either way, I don't think we should stay in Chicago," Lucas offered. "If we aren't going to go take a side in the fight, then we don't need to be here when the fireworks go off."

"Isn't there something we should do about that?" Will asked. "A lot of people in the city could get hurt."

"I tried to tell him," Dustin said. "Smith didn't want to listen to me. He thinks he knows everything. If the agents want to have a Batman vs Superman fight right here and knock down half the city, it's not our job to save them from themselves. Our priority is keeping Allie safe."

"We need to get mobile again," Mike interrupted. "Whatever our plan is, we can't get very far on foot. Do you think Will's car is still at his house, or you think the agents took it away?" He turned back to look at Joyce. "What about your car?"

"It got hit pretty hard," she told him. "I don't know if it still runs."

"We wouldn't all fit in Will's car, anyway," Dustin reminded him. "No, we need something bigger. How about that?" The others followed his finger as he pointed at a red minivan nestled among the other cars in the employee parking lot of some plastics factory or other. "I don't see any security guards or cameras. We can slip in, grab the van, and be on our way in five minutes."

"You want to steal someone's car?" Will asked in surprise.

"This is an emergency, Will," Dustin told him. "The needs of the seven outweigh the needs of the one. When this is all over, we can bring it back."

"You think the owner just left his keys under the seat for us to take?" Lucas scoffed.

"Nope," Dustin said proudly. He pulled the creased and dog eared book out of his pocket and held it up in front of Lucas' face. "1001

tips and tricks for spies!" The book was folded open to a page where Dustin had scrawled a few notes in the margins. "Page 92: how to hotwire a car."

"You can't learn that from a book," Lucas said.

"Tell that to Carl Sagan. I learned about the Cosmos from a book," Dustin replied. He turned to look at Mike. "What do you say?"

Mike considered for a moment. "You really think you can do it?"

"Positive," Dustin said.

Twenty minutes later, Dustin cheered as he touched two wires together and the minivan started up.

"We have ignition," he said proudly. "Get in everybody. There's plenty of room."

Hopper threw himself to the pavement as a burst of fire tore through the air over head. What had once been a peaceful city block of downtown Chicago suddenly reminded him of nothing less than Vietnam. The cops and SWAT and National Guard were firing away with pistol and automatic weapons and whatever else they had. In response, someone was shooting jets of bright orange flame at them, taking out squad cars one or two at a time, burning alive whatever cops or soldiers were unlucky enough to be caught in the blast radius.

He shielded his eyes from the bright light as another jet of flame impacted the front bumper of another squad car, lifting the thing onto its rear wheels before it fell heavily back to the ground, now a burning mass of metal and rubber. Several cops ran or crawled away from the wreck, on fire themselves, thrashing and waving their arms.

Hopper pressed his belly against the pavement, but couldn't resist craning his neck to see, as best he could, the lone man who was causing all the destruction.

"Hop, that's-"

"I know," Hopper said to Sam.

"That's our Arsonist," Sam yelled over the sound of gunfire and roaring flames.

"I know!" Hopper repeated.

"What's he doing here?" Sam demanded.

"I don't know," Hopper said, struggling to be heard over the sound of the war zone.

"How did he get out of jail?" Sam continued.

"I don't KNOW," Hopper snapped. Pressing himself even harder against the pavement as another explosion went off nearby, he turned and looked over his shoulder at where his truck was parked. He flinched instinctively at the sound of two more explosions not very far away, one right after the other.

"I think we can make it, Sam," Hopper yelled to his friend. He judged the distance to the truck and took note of any burning debris that lay in their path. "Just keep your head low and move fast. Then we'll-"

A stray jet of fire tore through the air and blasted his truck skyward. Hopper buried his face against the ground and braced himself as a rain of gravel and broken glass sprinkled over his back. A few of the red hot pieces landed on his bare neck. He swore and brushed them off.

"This way," Sam yelled, tugging on Hopper's arm. "Nothing's burning over there. I think we can make it."

"My truck!" Hopper growled to himself as he army crawled along side Sam, trying to put distance between themselves as the mad firestarter.

Mike watched from the very back seat of the van as Lucas drummed his fingers nervously on the steering wheel while they headed South, away from downtown Chicago. The traffic was a hundred times worse than it ever was in Hawkins, but it wasn't at all unusual for the big city. Mike wished the other drivers would clear an open path for him and his friends to get out of the city, but they obviously didn't

know there was, or was about to be, a nuclear bomb dropped in their midst. It was actually lucky the people didn't know, Mike thought to himself, because if they all tried to evacuate the city at once, the roads would would become parking lots and they'd never make it out.

Lucas had the radio turned low so that they could keep tabs on what was going on. Mike's heart sank as he heard a new reporter's voice cut into the usual drone about traffic and weather.

"...Breaking news of a fire downtown at the DuSable bridge..."

"Lucas, turn it up," Mike called up to him.

"Wait," El interrupted. "I need to see." Mike glanced over to see her flick her head toward the front of the van. All on its own, the radio changed to another station, then to another, and then another before El found an empty channel that was pure static. She flicked her head again, and the volume knob clicked all the way up. The static was so loud it drowned out the sound of passing cars outside.

Dustin turned all the way around in the front passenger seat to look at El. Will and Joyce, in the van's middle row of seats, did the same. Even Lucas stared into the rear view mirror, watching to see what El would do.

She handed Allie over to Mike. The baby squirmed a little, but she didn't seem to be getting upset. Mike held her while El pulled off her jacket and hung it over her face. She took off her seatbelt and turned sideways in the seat so she could lay down. With her head in Mike's lap, her face covered by the jacket, and the radio static covering most of the sound from outside, Mike tried to sit very still and let El work her magic.

The flood of distant noises quickly faded away to nothing, and El opened her eyes to find herself back inside the void. It was quiet. Everything was black, except for what she wanted to see. She turned around in place, searching. Shallow water splashed each time she took a step.

She'd been focusing on the face of Smith, the agent Smith who had

chased her and her baby and her friends all the way from Hawkins to this place. She wasn't fond of Smith, but she held the image of his face in her mind as she searched. It didn't take long.

She found him nearby. He appeared to her in the void, not very far away. Shallow water splashed her feet as she moved closer. He was crouched low, a pistol in one hand, a radio in the other. That was how he appeared to her, with no surroundings, a lone figure standing in the blackness. But El had spent years honing her talents. At first, she had needed to use her Remote Viewing, because it had been the only way to see Mike when she was hiding from the Bad Men. Once that danger had passed, it had been useful to see things in the world that she couldn't actually go and see herself. All these years later, she could see far more than Papa and the other scientists at the lab had been able to get out of her.

El expanded her vision so that she could see a little of Smith's surroundings. He was shouting into the radio while he used a crumbling cement barrier as cover from something. As she watched, he peered over the broken hunk of cement, fired a few shots at some invisible enemy, and then ducked back under cover. El pulled back her vision a little further so that she could see more.

Fire. There was fire all around Smith. Several police cars, destroyed, burned out hulks of cars, were strewn around him. There were other men, too, using whatever they could find for cover as they fired their guns at that unseen enemy. There still other men, lying still and dead on the ground.

She pulled back even farther. Now El could see a lone man, walking calmly along a bridge over the Chicago river. Each time he pointed his hand toward the police and other armed men who had set up a barricade at one end of the bridge, he threw a jet of flame their way. El's heart beat faster as she watched the firestarter blast cars into the air and shatter concrete barriers with a casual wave of his hand. Some people scattered and fled from his attacks. Some were tossed through the air like dolls. Some caught fire themselves and ran away in chaotic convulsions. El's eyes began to fill up with tears as she imagined, though she tried not to, her tiny baby growing up to be possessed of this kind of power.

Something caught her attention, and she zoomed in for a closer look.

Where El's heart beat had been accelerating before, it suddenly stopped. Impossibly, she recognized Hopper's face in the crowd of people. She couldn't imagine what he was doing there, but her eyes told her it was true. On the edge of the war zone on the bridge, Hopper kept low as he tried to get away. She watched for another few seconds, frozen with tension and desperately wishing she could do something from so far away.

Another blast of flame impacted against a police car too close to Hopper. The flaming metal was thrown into the air, along with a pile of cement and steel rebar from the ground. El watched in horror as several thousand pounds of rubble crashed back to earth. She screamed for Hopper to hear her, to look out, to move, but her voice only echoed in the empty void. She couldn't see Hopper anymore under the pile of rubble. She cried out again, dropping to her knees in the shallow water of the void, reaching out helplessly with her hands, as if she could do something.

She cried out again and found her connection broken.

She was back in the van, her jacket draped over her face, her head in Mike's lap.

El sat up, clawing at the jacket and throwing it off of her.

"Lucas, turn around!" She yelled. "We need to go back!"

12. Chapter 12

Chapter 12

Lucas swung the minivan around and jumped over the little cement median into the oncoming lane. Ignoring the horns from the traffic, he did a quick U-turn and headed back toward the heart of Chicago.

"What did you see?" Dustin demanded, almost climbing out of his seat to get a better look at El.

"Hopper," El said quickly. She flicked her head toward the radio again, cutting off the static.

"Where?" Joyce asked, almost as ready to jump out of her seat as Dustin. "What's happened?"

Mike shifted the baby into one arm so that he could take El's hand. Fresh out of her vision, she was breathing fast. Her face was sweaty. Her eyes darted around the interior of the van like it was filled with enemies. A single drop of blood ran from her nose.

He could tell she was searching for a way to quickly summarize all that she'd seen.

"Hopper's in trouble?" He asked her. She nodded. Her hair had fallen into her eyes when she'd thrown the jacket off her face, making her look even more distressed. He brushed the hair back and tried to read her face.

"Where is he?" Mike asked, trying to calmly get the important details.

"There," El said, nodding toward the radio. "At the bridge."

"The DuSable Bridge," Lucas picked up. "Where the fire is?"

El nodded, swallowing hard and trying to slow her breathing.

"So Smith was right about another firestarter," Lucas said as he swerved around a car that wasn't going fast enough. "The agents tried to engage with him, and he's lighting downtown Chicago on fire."

"This is bad," Dustin said.

"But what's Hopper doing there?" Lucas continued?

Mike looked to El. She shook her head.

"No idea," Mike translated for Lucas. "But it doesn't matter. We have to go get him."

"Wait," El said, grabbing Mike's wrist hard. Her eyes went even wider as she stared into Mike's. "What about Allie? We can't bring her there."

"I'll go," Joyce said. "The rest of you can keep the baby safe. I'll bring Hopper back."

"No way we're letting you go alone," Lucas said, jumping onto the curb to get around another slow car.

"Yeah, it could be Armageddon down there," Dustin agreed. "You'll need backup."

"I'll come," El told Joyce in a quiet voice.

Mike squeezed her hand a little harder. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. "Hopper needs me. He could be hurt. I'll go. You keep Allie safe."

"How are we going to do this?" Lucas called to the back of the van over Mike and El's quiet exchange.

"Let Joyce take the minivan," Dustin offered. "I can get us another one."

"I'll go, too, mom," Will spoke up. "I know a way to get you there faster."

Mike remained silent. He wasn't sure if he was squeezing El or the baby harder, but he didn't want to let either of them go.

"Are you sure about this?" He asked her one last time.

She nodded, wiping away the blood from her nose.

Will gazed out the minivan's window as the rest of his friends hurried down the Chicago sidewalk in search of another car to steal. Lucas and Dustin almost seemed to take up flanking positions on either side of Mike and the baby, as if danger might swoop down on them at any second. Will felt so bad for Mike, and wished he could do more to help his friend, but Hopper was in even more immediate danger, and Will couldn't leave him to fend for himself. Sure, Hopper was the most capable guy he'd ever known, but Will knew better than most people that there were some forces no human could go up against alone.

Joyce threw the minivan into gear and started pulling away. Will watched his friends disappear into the distance for a few more heartbeats. At the very least, he knew Lucas and Dustin would give everything they had for Mike and the baby. That made Will feel a little better about leaving them on their own, but only a little. He may not have been any kind of great warrior, but if anything bad happened to his friends while he was gone, he'd have a hard time living with himself. Still, he felt the same about Hopper.

Pulling himself back to the task at hand, Will reached from the minivan's middle row to tap his mom on the shoulder.

"Mom, can you pull over? I don't know if I can do this while the van's moving," he told her. From her new place in the seat next to Joyce, El turned all the way around to look at Will. Everything on her face told him how she felt about what they were doing. Will understood how much worse it was for her to leave Mike and the baby behind.

"Are you sure you can do this?" El asked him. Will felt a half smile come to his face. He shouldn't have been surprised that she already knew what he had in mind.

"You want me to pull over?" Joyce asked, glancing in the rear view mirror at Will.

"It'll take us forever to get across town like this," Will told her, waving his hand at the slow cars all around them. "I can get us there

faster."

Joyce didn't pull over, but stopped right in the middle of the street. She put the van in park and stared into the mirror, waiting for Will. He suddenly felt nervous. He'd never told his mom about his the episode he'd had as a kid, that he still had every once in a while. He took a deep breath, searching for the words he needed to spill a decade old secret to the very person he should have told before anyone else. He glanced over at El for support, and she put a comforting hand on his and nodded for him to go ahead.

"Mom, I have to tell you..." he began.

Joyce abandoned the rear view mirror and turned around to look at him.

"Are you taking us to... that place?"

Will couldn't stop himself from jerking back in his seat. He stared at his mom with wide eyes.

"You KNOW?" He said incredulously.

She nodded.

El smiled gently at Will. "She always knows when you aren't telling the truth," El told him. Will glanced down at the floor, feeling a little guilty.

"How long have you known?" He asked.

"I think we should hurry," El interrupted him, still gently, but firmly. Will watched as her eyes flicked upward. She looked as if she were listening to something only she could hear. Then she looked back at Will and nodded. "We should hurry," She repeated.

"Okay," Will said, trying to psych himself up for the task. He'd never moved anything as big as a van before. While he prepared himself, Joyce glanced over nervously at El.

"Is it safe?" She asked.

El noded in answer to her, but without much conviction.

Will closed his eyes, held his breath, tried to focus, and squeezed with his mind. A second later, he felt the familiar cold and damp of the Upside Down penetrate the air around him.

He opened his eyes and looked out the van's window. The sun was gone. So were all the cars that had been crowding the road. He was still on the same road, but it was nearly empty now. The pavement was cracked, as if it hadn't been repaired in decades. Grey mold grew over much of the surface, and slimy vines were draped lazily across it. There were a few cars, which looked old and abandoned, some of them also overgrown with vines, but otherwise the road was empty.

"No one to slow us down," Will told his mom.

Joyce put the van back into drive, scowling around at the sinister vines and the floating particles in the air. She'd been to the Upside Down once in her life, and it hadn't left her with any happy memories. She stomped on the gas, and will felt himself thrown back in his seat at she tore off down the empty Chicago road, the van bouncing and jostling each time she ran over a vine.

Sam was awakened by a searing pain in his leg. He cried out and tried to jerk away from the source of the pain before he brain caught up to where he was and what was happening around him. All at once, the smell of smoke and the roar of flames, punctuated by gunfire, reminded Sam that he was still in the war zone. Somewhere not far away, their Arsonist from Sacramento was blowing up the DuSable bridge and everything around it, piece by piece.

Sam tried to jerk his leg away from the pain again, and realized it was trapped under pieces of metal debris that might have once been a car. The metal was almost red hot as well as sharp, and must have knocked him flat against the pavement, though he didn't remember the actual moment of being knocked out.

He tried to grab and lift the pile of burning scrap metal, but recoiled instantly. It was too hot to touch. Instead, he kicked it hard with his left boot, again and again until he was able to jerk his right foot free.

He scrambled up off the ground and tested his full weight on the injured leg. It could have been worse, he decided.

With a sudden, unhappy, jolt, he realized that Hopper must have been even more badly hurt, otherwise he would have pulled Sam from the burning scrap metal himself. His eyes began to dart frantically around the immediate area, searching for any sign of his friend. There were a dozen nearby piles of burning scrap metal that had once been cars. Hopper could have been anywhere. Sam took a step in one direct, then another, unsure of where to start. He called Hopper's name, but didn't know if he could be heard over the chaos. Even as he searched, Sam flinched and ducked instinctively when another car was blown sky high by the Arsonist, who was stalking his way down the bridge some distance away, casually throwing jets of fire here and there.

Through the spattering of gravel and metal that rained back down from the incinerated car, Sam heard a ragged voice calling his name.

He whirled around, searching for the voice. His heart leaped as he saw a familiar blue flannel sleeve sticking out from under a pile of twisted metal. Hopper's arm waved as he called Sam's name again, louder this time. Same dashed toward him, bits of scrap metal shifting and slipping under his feet as he went.

"Hold on Hop, I'll get you out," Sam said as he approached. Hop grunted a response and tried to push from his prone position. The metal shifted, but not enough. Sam grabbed what might have once been a rear bumper with both hands and tried to lift. The metal was hot, but it didn't burn him. He gritted his teeth and strained, but it wasn't enough to lift most of a car.

"Push! Help me out here," he yelled over the background noise.

"I'm pushing!" Hopper yelled back. Sam relaxed his grip on the metal, breathing hard. He looked around wildly for something he could use as a pry bar, but nothing jumped out at him. The sound of another explosion nearby urged him to hurry. He shifted his grip on the metal again, bent his knees, and tried to lift.

"Push!" He growled at Hopper again. Sam strained until it felt like his

back muscles were going to pop, but he wasn't strong enough to lift the wreck. A second later, his muscles gave out and he sagged back down to lean on the metal he'd been trying to lift.

"Hurry Sam," Hopper called from under the pile.

"Hang on!" Sam yelled back, his shoulders heaving as he breathed. He realized that the fire was probably beginning to eat up some of the oxygen in the air. He braced himself for another try, taking several huge, hurried breaths.

"Find something to-" Hopper begain.

The sound of screeching tires almost right on top of him made Sam jump. He threw himself out of the way before a minivan, which could NOT have been there a second ago, almost ran him over. He jumped back to his feet as the van skidded to a stop only a few feet from where he'd been standing. The doors flew open and three people piled out. Sam opened his mouth to speak, but his breath caught in his chest.

His adrenaline-filled brain was slow to process what he was seeing.

Even before her shoes hit rubble-strewn pavement, the young woman from the van was reaching a hand out toward Hopper. Acting all on its own, the pile of metal lifted off him and hung suspended in the air.

Clearly not as surprised as Sam was, Hopper scrambled out from under the scrap metal and ran toward the newcomers. The three of them threw themselves on him in a hurried hug and then dragged him toward the van. Sam continued to stare until his brain finally caught up, and he realized that this wasn't any harder to believe than a man who could create fire in his empty hands.

Sam jumped as the young woman released her invisible grip and the pile of scrap metal came crashing back to the ground. Hopper turned and urgently waved him over. Feeling an unexpected smile forming on his face, Sam walked over to join his new rescuers.

Mike watched Lucas glance in the rear view mirror again. He'd been doing that ever since Dustin had stolen them another car and they'd gotten back on the road heading South. Logically, Mike knew it was unlikely that any cops, or even agents in their black sedans, were likely to be following them, but he couldn't help himself from checking the mirrors every few seconds, either. He also couldn't help himself from nervously fiddling with the radio. He shifted Allie in his hands again so he could reach over and adjust the volume again. Whatever was going on down town, it sounded like complete chaos. The frantic newsmen on the radio had no clue what was going on, but Mike could tell it wasn't good.

Lucas looked away from the mirrors again and glanced at Mike's hand on the radio knob.

"It sounds pretty bad..." Lucas said.

Mike nodded. "Lucas, can you... could you..."

"You want me to go back and check on them," Lucas offered, reading Mike's mind.

"Yes," Mike nodded emphatically, glad that his friend had offered the words instead of him. "They're running right into trouble."

"They need some backup," Lucas agreed.

"Dustin and I will be fine," Mike blurted out, trying to convince himself. He looked into the back seat at Dustin, who was nodding his head in agreement. "The farther we get from that mess, the safer we are," Mike added to Lucas. "They'll need all the help they can get."

"Got it," Lucas said. "Are you sure you two will be alright?"

"I'm sure," Mike said, checking with Dustin one more time. "We'll be fine. Just... just go and make sure they're okay back there."

"Okay," Lucas said as he pulled onto the side of the road. "You two stick to the plan. Don't do anything crazy and come back for me. Get Allie out of the city. We'll meet back up when this is over."

"I'll make sure he doesn't do anything stupid," Dustin said, replacing

Lucas behind the steering wheel. "I'm in charge of the mission now."

"Do you want this?" Lucas asked, standing back from their stolen car as Dustin settled himself in.

Dustin turned away from adjusting the mirror to see Lucas offering him one of the pistols he'd stolen from the agents. Dustin hesitated then snatched it up.

"You sure you can use that?" Lucas asked him.

"No need," Dustin said, grinning. "With me driving, they'll never catch us."

"Right," Lucas said, smiling back. He looked past Dustin at Mike and reached for the other pistol. "You, too?" He asked.

"I'll have my hands full," Mike told him, bouncing Allie up and down just a little. "Besides, Dustin's right. They'll never catch us."

"Okay John McClane," Lucas said. "Be safe, you two. I'll check on the others."

"Be careful," Mike couldn't help saying.

"Don't worry about me," Lucas told him. "I wouldn't worry about the others, either. I'm sure they're alright."

"Yeah," Dustin added. "I almost feel bad for those other psychics, once they run into El for the first time."

"Get out of here," Lucas said, slapping a hand on the car door and stepping away. Dustin gave him a two fingered salute and pulled back into the flow of traffic heading South, away from downtown. Mike watched Lucas shrink in the rear view mirror, hoping he'd see his friend again soon.

13. Chapter 13

Chapter 13

"What are you doing here?" Joyce asked Hopper, hugging him fiercely.

"Looking for you," Hopper answered. "What are YOU doing here?" He winced as his right arm got caught up in the hug. Will looked down to notice that Hopper's sleeve was torn open to reveal a big, bloody gash. He quickly pulled off his jacket and offered it up. Hopper smile-grimaced in thanks as he took the jacket and began to wrap his arm tightly.

"We need to get out of here," Hopper said quickly. "Anywhere but here." Joyce pulled him toward the van, acting as if his bleeding arm was life threatening.

"Lie down in the back seat," She insisted.

"I'm fine," Hopper protested. "It's just a scratch." Since Joyce was already halfway into the van's middle row with him, he turned toward Sam. "Sam, you drive. Get us out of here."

Will slid into the front passenger seat. If this new guy, Sam, was going to be driving, Will would have to give him a quick primer on the Upside Down. Only when the four of them had climbed inside the van did they realize that El remained behind, standing several steps away, a dark expression on her face.

"Come on, kid," Hopper said , completely failing to read her.

"She isn't coming with us," Will said quietly so El wouldn't have to.

Both Hopper and Joyce gave her confused looks.

"You go," El told them all. "I'm staying."

"Sorry, not a chance. It's too dangerous," Hopper told her. "Thanks for saving me, but you're coming with us. We're getting out of this together."

El quietly shook her head.

"If I go with you, they'll follow us. Today, or tomorrow, or the next day, they'll find us. No more running."

Will watched Hopper gape at El. That was understandable. Hopper didn't know what had happened the last few days. He also watched his mom, already breaking into tears, but not protesting. He might have protested, too, but he'd already guessed at what El was going to do, and he knew he couldn't talk her out of it if he tried.

"Come on, everybody," Will said gently, touching his mom's arm to get her attention. "There's nothing we can do to help. This is too big for us."

"No way!" Hopper argued.

"Just come with us for now," Joyce insisted. "We'll think of something later."

"Not later," El said, shaking her head. "Now. I'm not running anymore."

"You don't know what you're up against," Hopper said.

El turned her dark gaze away from the van and toward the firestarter who was now halfway down the bridge from where they sat.

"I see him," El said to Hopper. "There's another one, too. I can't see him, but he's here."

"So leave it and let's get out of here," Hopper said, his voice strained.

"I can't," El almost whispered. "I don't want them to come to Hawkins. I don't want them to find any of you, or Mike or Allie or Dustin or Lucas. I can't-" Her voice caught and stuck, refusing to work, so she shut her mouth, but she didn't look away from them. Will found himself staring sadly. In the years that he'd known her, he had always admired how El didn't try to hide from her friends. She was strong enough to let them see her when she was weak. He wished he was that strong.

"Let's go," Will said to his Mom and Hopper. "She's doing this."

"El-" Hopper said, but she looked past him, locking eyes with Will.

"Make sure they get away, as far away as they can," El said to him.

The fire all around them was kicking up a breeze, making her hair and clothes flutter. Her eyes were the hardest he'd ever seen them. He felt only fear in the pit of his stomach, but he nodded to her. "I promise," he said.

El nodded back to him, then flicked her chin toward the van doors, which slammed shut at her command.

"Hey!" Hopper said, grabbing the door with his one good arm and trying to open it.

Before Hopper could start kicking out the windows or something, Will closed his eyes and squeezed with his mind, pulling the van into the Upside Down.

That seemed to catch Hopper off guard, and he stopped yanking on the door handle as he stared out the van's windows.

"What the... How did we get here?" Hopper asked.

"I'm sorry," Will said. "It's the only way. And it's what El wanted." Will turned his attention to the man behind the wheel. The man who he guessed to be Hopper's friend, Sam, was staring in wide-eyed amazement at the alien world around him.

"Are you okay?" Will asked him.

"What... Where..." Sam was lost for words.

"We're in another dimension," Will told him quickly, hoping he could get the guy up to speed in time for them to get moving. Maybe he'd need to take the wheel himself. "It exists beneath our world. Sort of. My friends call it the Upside Down."

"Upside Down..." Sam said, looking left and right, taking it all in.

"We're still in Chicago," Will explained. "We're still on the bridge. You see it? We haven't gone anywhere. We're just in another version of it."

There was a flash of orange light, something Will wasn't used to seeing in the dark and dull Upside Down. He wasn't sure if El was already engaging the firestarter or not, but he knew they needed to get moving.

"It's Sam, right?" Will asked him.

"Yeah," Sam said, his eyes still swimming over the strange world on the other side of his windshield.

"And you're a friend of Hopper's?"

"We go way back," Sam said absently.

"Okay, so Sam? I'm going to need you to focus. We need to get moving. We don't want to stay here. Can you handle it?"

"Sure thing, kid," Sam said, reaching for the shifter and sliding the van into Drive, still looking around distractedly.

"That way," Will pointed helpfully.

From the seat behind him, Hopper put a hand on Will's arm. "You did this?" He asked.

"Yeah," Will said nervously.

"Huh," Hopper said, looking from Will to Joyce. He seemed to consider it a moment. "Are there any... demuhgorgins?" He asked.

"I don't think so," Will told him honestly.

"Listen, it's not safe, what we're letting El go and do," Hopper insisted.

"I know that," Will said. "She knows that. She's doing this for us, and for her baby."

Hopper scowled, reluctant to give in.

"Baby Allie is the reason all this is happening, kind of," Will continued. "Those psychics are after her, the agents are after her-"

"Agents!" Hopper said, realization spreading over his face. "Why are there a bunch of government guys all over Hawkins?"

"They want baby Allie," Will repeated. "Mike and El and Dustin had to escape Hawkins. They came here to hide out at my house. And then the agents found us there and... here we are."

"Why do they want Mike and El's baby?" Hopper asked.

"She has powers," Will told him. He realized that the honest answer hadn't even sounded weird when he said it out loud this time. "She controls fire."

"No..." Hopper said in mild disbelief. But already a thoughtful expression was coming over him. "Like him?" Hopper asked, nodding his head back toward the direction they'd come from, toward the bridge in Chicago in another dimension where guy with pyrokinetic powers was burning it down, one car at a time.

Will nodded somberly. He realized that he should have felt a little bad about spilling Mike and El's secret, but it was hardly a secret anymore, and Hopper needed to know.

"A lot's happened in the last few days," Will told him. "You missed some pretty wild stuff. You wouldn't believe-"

"Oh, I believe it," Hopper said. "Sam and I were into some pretty wild stuff of our own. He's with the Sacramento PD. That's where your firestarter back there is from."

"Really?" Will asked, glancing from Hopper to Sam and back.

"Yeah. Name's Franc," Hopper explained. "He's not a bad person, once you get to know him."

"He's not?" Will asked, not sure how to take that.

"Something must have happened," Hopper amended. "I don't know why he's doing this."

"We know why," Will said. "He's after little Allie. At least, that's what the agents think."

"You talked to them?" Hopper asked in surprise.

"Well, one of them," Will told him. "His name's Smith. He's not a bad person, once you get to know him. He's just misguided."

"What in the world would Franc want with Mike and El's baby?" Hopper asked.

"I don't really know," Will told him. "They have the same ability, so we think they share a kind of connection..."

Hopper turned in his seat to look at Joyce, who was trying to rewrap the borrowed jacket around his injured arm. "Are you up to speed on all this?" He asked incredulously.

She gave a shrug and a nod. "Most of it. The boys seem to have things figured out. I didn't know what was going on when I drove up here from home. I just knew Will was in trouble."

"So why did you bring us here?" Hopper asked Will, waving an arm toward the Upside Down all around them.

"We can travel faster, and without anyone seeing us," Will told him. "Right now, Mike and the others are trying to get the baby out of the city. And right now, WE need to be as far away from that bridge as we can. After El is finished, we can all meet up again, and maybe it will be safe to go back to Hawkins. I hope so."

Will looked back out the window and saw they they were creeping along at a leisurely thirty miles and hour or so. He turned to Sam and slapped him firmly on the arm. "Drive!"

"Yes sir," Sam said, stepping on the gas.

El gazed at the blank pavement for a long moment with her eyes out of focus, almost oblivious to the chaos around her. She wanted to make sure Will and Joyce and Hopper got some distance between them before she started anything. Without taking the time and effort

to slip into the Void, her ability to sense them was pretty weak, but she knew each of them very well, which made it easier to recognize their individual presences from a short distance. Besides, all she needed to know was whether they were moving away, her sense of them becoming fainter and fainter, which they were. When she felt they were at a safe distance, and getting safer, she mentally shook herself awake and returned her focus to the here and now.

The flood of noise and light washed over her as she looked around and really got her bearings. The ornate old bridge over the Chicago River was strewn with the burning hulks of what had once been police cars, government black sedans, and those white vans that the agents used for all sorts of purposes. A few people still ran around in some semblance of order, firing their guns from whatever cover they could find. Many more people, though, littered the ground, along with burning scrap metal and other debris from the battle.

El felt a deep sadness in the pit of her stomach. Maybe some of the dead had been bad people, the type of people who would take her little girl away and keep her in a little box while they tested and experimented on her gifts. But most of them would have been good people: cops, like her friend Hopper, or Army men, like her friend Lucas.

She didn't know if she, or really her baby, was the reason why all this had happened. That thought alone would have made her feel guilty enough, though Allie's safety overshadowed all of that. If the only way to keep her baby safe was to let all these people kill each other in the street, then El would have sadly done it. But she didn't know if the situation was that black and white, at least not yet. She didn't know what the agents would do tomorrow, if they would keep chasing her, or leave her alone. She didn't know who these two men with abilities of their own were, or what they really wanted to do. It was possible they also wanted to take Allie and raise her to be like themselves, which was something El would never let happen. She didn't know if that was true, either. She only knew what Smith had suggested to her, and he might or might not be trustworthy.

Though she didn't know any of those things for certain, she DID know that a lot of people, many of them good people, were dying right in front of her. She couldn't walk away from that.

The obvious threat was the lone man, still slowly making his way across the bridge. By himself, he didn't look unusual or threatening, but by simply pointing his hand at a target, he conjured up angry orange flames and shot them in great jets to blast away whatever he wanted. This man wasn't the only psychic nearby. El knew there was another, but that one wasn't out in the open, and he wasn't blowing up cars and burning people.

El wasn't fireproof. In fact, she had a semi-happy memory of burning herself on a candle the first time Mike had introduced her to birthday cake. But the firestarter didn't know she was even there, let alone what she could do. Lowering her chin and glaring at him, El took a few steps in his direction. He didn't notice her approach, amid the noise and wreckage. It took almost no effort. She flicked her head up and to the left. With bursts of flame still erupting from his hands, he was tossed like a rag doll over the railing and off the bridge.

There was too much noise for El to hear him hit the river below, but she knew he had. If he knew how to swim, he'd survive.

Everything changed at that moment. The sound of gunfire stopped as the agents and police and soldiers stared in surprise. What she'd done seemed to be enough to bring the other psychic out of hiding. El felt him approaching from the other side of the bridge. His presence was unmistakable, like a tiny black hole in her mind's eye, sucking in all the light around it and leaving only cold emptiness. She turned around to face him.

El had seen some frightening things in her life. Next to the demogorgon, this was the most disturbing thing on two legs she'd yet laid eyes on. It wore clothes, but it wasn't really a man. One arm was larger than the other, ending in long tendril-like fingers that hung nearly to the ground. The skin on that arm was gray and scaly. His head wasn't round. One side was swollen, and covered in patches of that same scaly gray skin. One eye was nothing but a tiny speck of light gleaming out of an otherwise black pit.

As she stared at the monster, repellent as he was, she found that she couldn't look away. Some kind of tunnel vision had fallen over her, and the monster seemed to grow in perspective even as the bridge and flames and ruined police cars seemed to shrink into the

background. Her vision began to blur, and a growing sense of dizziness crept over her. She felt unsteady, and wanted to take a few stumbling steps to regain her balance, but her legs were sluggish and barely responded. Then she heard a voice.

The voice was inhuman, both too low and too high pitched for her to really hear, but it washed over her mind like water. She felt submerged in the droning whisper. Though she couldn't make out individual words, she understood what the voice was asking her, telling her, to do. She wanted to go over to the monster. She wanted to cross the bridge and walk beside him. She wanted to lift his firestarter back out of the river, and the three of them would walk the streets, invincible and unafraid of the men with guns. She wanted to lead the monster to her baby, so that he could extend his influence to little Allie as well.

El's eyes snapped open wide. She wanted to shake herself awake, but her body didn't want to respond.

Get out! She thought, pushing back against the words in her mind.

That tiny speck of light that the monster had in place of one eye seemed to glow brighter. El felt the voice in her head stronger than ever. Where the words had washed over her like a calm wave before, they now hit her with an oppressive force. She wanted to ally herself with the monster. She wanted to do whatever he commanded. She wanted to tell him where Mike had taken their baby.

"No!" She said out loud, her voice finally obeying her brain. She shook her head and tried to squeeze her eyes shut, but she still found herself unable to break eye contact with the monster. He turned up the intensity even more, and El physically staggered, as if a weight had been dropped on her shoulders from above. She slapped both hands to her temples and tried to squeeze her eyes shut so she wouldn't have to look at the monster. Even though he was still some distance away, he seemed to loom larger and larger in her eyes. The voice in her head was bellowing now, instead of whispering. The voice wanted to know where her baby was hiding. The voice wanted El to give her up.

"Get out!" She screamed, the words scratching the inside of her

throat. The monster stumbled backward a few steps, hit by the force of her mental scream. Everything was clear again.

El blinked her eyes once. She could see. The voice was gone. The monster was out of her head.

She felt a small trickle of blood begin to run from her nose.

The monster's malformed jaw opened in a sneer. She both felt and heard a low rumble from his throat, like the growl of an animal from some other world. His shoulders tensed, and his one un-mutated hand curled into a fist. El felt a different kind of pressure inside her mind. There were no words this time. She felt no suggestion or command. It was only a pressure. A pressure that was quickly turning into pain.

With a jolt, El recognized the sensation. She'd never felt it before, but she'd inflicted it on others once in her life. The night that agents from the Lab had captured Mike and her friends at Hawkins middle school, El had reached out and touched their minds, and she had squeezed and squeezed until-

She felt the pain inside her head, like a vice crushing her from the inside, barely a second later. The pressure was unbearable. She thought her skull was going to split open.

El screamed again and pushed back against the pressure. She felt it weaken as she pushed it out and away. The monster pushed back, and El pushed back harder. It felt like two enormous metal hands were pressing in on her from either side, but she pushed them away, inch by inch until they couldn't reach her. Her head was pounding from the effort, and more blood came from her nose, the first drop falling off her lip to land on the pavement.

She flicked her head toward the monster, trying to toss him off the bridge like she had with the other one, but he resisted her. El lowered her chin, glaring at the monster, and pushed hard. He was shaken and staggered from her push, but he dug his heels into the ground and pushed back. El screamed, stretching out both hands toward the monster. She pushed with all her mind across the yards of distance between them, but he pushed back, arresting her efforts. Debris and scraps from the earlier battle were kicked up by by El's

mental storm and flew around like leaves in the wind. The monster refused to give in.

El screamed without words, her eyes blazing as she drew on everything she had. Wrecked cars and broken slabs of cement floated up from the ground around her. For a moment, El was surrounded by a gently whirling mass of wreckage from the earlier battle, and then she threw those, too, against the monster, along with her mental assault.

The wrecked cars and cement boulders crashed against an invisible wall before they touched him. With one wave of his hand, the monster swept El's projectiles from the sky. With another hand motion, he sent a wave crashing into her.

El felt it hit her in the chest. The air went out of her lungs and she was knocked off her feet. She fell back to the ground hard, feeling every sharp bit of debris biting into her back as she landed. She tried to gasp for air, but her lungs wouldn't draw breath.

She had almost scrambled up to her knees when he swung at her again, as if trying to strike her across the face, even from the opposite end of the bridge. El had no time to fight back. Her arm instructively flew over her face to protect against the bits of scrap metal and rubble the came flying along with the Monster's invisible shockwave. The one defensive instinct must have triggered another, because El felt her mind pushing back against the attack before she was conscious of doing so. Her own defenses were too little, too late. The shockwave hammered into her, tossing her along with a big pile of wreckage into the air and further down the bridge. The instinctive use of her powers had been enough to save her body from being crushed flat, or sliced to ribbons by flying bits of metal, but she was far from unhurt, and her lungs still didn't want to work. Her head throbbed and spun at the same time. Her body ached from the blows and stung from a few stray cuts.

She knew another attack was coming, and this time she had enough presence of mind to protect herself as best she could. She wrapped what felt like a solid cocoon around herself. As the monster's next strike blasted her and whole chunks of the bridge's pavement into the air, she was at least mostly unharmed.

She crashed to a stop against the marble wall of a building. If not for her insulating cocoon, she would probably have split the back of her head wide open against the marble. Her feet touched the ground as she fell, but she was too tired to catch herself. Her legs folded and she dropped briefly to her hands and knees amid the painfully sharp bits of metal and concrete that littered the street.

El had been pushed back, all the way back off the bridge and onto the city street that ran next to it. The monster leered at her from the bridge, barely a few steps away from where he'd begun their fight. El felt completely drained of energy. She slowly pushed herself back up to her feet. She could hear the voice in her head again, but this time it meant nothing to her. The monster could ask, could persuade, could command all he wanted. El would gladly have died before giving up what he wanted.

That upset him. She felt his anger, and she also read that he wasn't used to his powers failing. She felt him tensing, ready to hit her again.

The feeling of tiredness hit El harder than ever. She could try to shield herself again, and maybe, probably, she'd survive his first strike, and maybe the next one, and maybe the one after that. Maybe. But she felt to very tired.

She could attack him again, but she'd already thrown everything she had, and he'd held firm and pushed back. She didn't expect now, as weak as she was, she'd be able to do any better. El had very little left in her, and it seemed the monster wasn't tiring at all. She had no idea if his powers were limitless, or just greater than hers, or just different from hers. She was drained. And she was afraid.

The monster's glowing eye flashed as he gathered a big surge of energy and threw it across the bridge at her. El did the same. She had no time to gather anything extra, and she probably had nothing else left to gather in her entire body. So she struck out with what little she did have.

She didn't want to waste her last shot by trying in vain to hurt the monster. He was too strong for that. Instead she blew out the support pillars that held up the bridge.

His own attack smashed into the four story marble building behind her, turning it into a few million pounds of cascading rubble. El was conscious long enough as the huge chunks of marble fell on and around her to see the bridge collapse under the monster's feet, enveloping him as he fell out of sight.

14. Chapter 14

Chapter 14

Jack Smith was slowly dragged awake by the splitting pain in his head, and also his left shoulder, and also one of his ribs, and also his left knee. He opened his eyes, but the bright light hit him with almost as much force as his headache, so he closed them again. Keeping his eyes squeezed against the painful light, he tried to move the injured parts of his body. They hurt.

Rather than continuing to agrivate his wounds, Smith put his one good hand over his eyes and slowly tried to open them again. As they adjusted to the light, he lifted his head, which only made him hurt worse, and slowly looked around the room.

He was in a hospital bed. His head sagged back onto the pillow with a resigned sigh as his brain processed what must have happened. So he hadn't died in that unnatural fire on the bridge. From what he remembered of that battle, though, it couldn't have gone well after he'd been taken out. He counted himself very lucky to be alive.

Feeling that he might have regained enough strength to try again, Smith lifted his head from the pillow and tried to get a look out the door. He couldn't see much. There were nurses moving around in the hallway. He tried to call "nurse!" but his dry throat only made a rough approximation of the word. It turned out to be good enough to attract attention, though, because one of them came rushing in to check on him.

"Phone," he tried to say, ignoring her questions about how he was feeling. She started to adjust his monitoring equipment, and he reached up with his good hand to catch her sleeve.

"I need a phone, right now," he managed to squeeze out. She must have either realized the urgency in his voice, or just thought he was crazy and didn't want to upset him further, so she brought him a phone. Smith dialed a special 20 digit number with shaking fingers. He had no idea what had been going on out there while he'd been unconscious.

The phone rang twice before he heard the voice of Director Carver answer.

"What's happening out there?" Smith asked, trying to get his voice working like normal.

"Smith, you're awake," Carver remarked. "Tough kid. You were pretty banged up when we found you."

"How long have I been out?" Smith asked.

"Not long," Carver told him. "A few hours."

"The bridge?"

"A mess," Carver growled. "Complete disaster. I don't even know how many men we lost yet."

"The Russian?" Smith asked. "And the firestarter?"

"We've temporarily lost contact," Carver told him. "That won't last long. I'm about to surround and lock down the whole city. Every bridge, every street, we'll find them."

Smith started to speak, about to say that the two psychics were dangerous, but that seemed unnecessary.

"Don't worry about it, you just stay put and recover, kid," Carver continued. "I'll take it from here."

"But, sir!"

"You're on the bench, Smith. You've done your part, done it well. But I need you to sit out the rest of this one."

"What about the Wheeler family?" Smith asked.

"We'll get them, too," Carver said. "Don't worry. I've got a whole army moving in. Plans that Uncle Sam drew up in case the Russians ever invaded from the North. We'll have enough boots on the ground to take down an A-Rab dictator. We've got it covered. None of them are getting out of Chicago."

Lucas picked his way over the chunks of asphalt and concrete that littered Kinzie st as he made his way closer to the bridge. It looked like a war zone. Half of it had collapsed into the river. A whole fleet of fire trucks and ambulances were parked in and around the wreckage. The men and women were digging through the rubble, trying to find survivors.

His stomach knotted up as he thought about what must have happened. Maybe El had gotten in over her head. He stopped walking and surveyed the terrain. He took in the damage and tried to estimate which direction most of it had come from. There was a lot of damage. El could have been standing anywhere when the fighting had taken place, and in a battle between two giants, he couldn't be sure which of them had smashed which buildings.

One massive pile of rebar, marble, and concrete looked, more than the rest, like a bomb had been dropped there. He hurried over to it, ignoring any of the nearby search and rescue men, who were too busy to pay any attention to him anyway.

There might be nothing for him to find, Lucas hoped. El might have walked away from the fight, alive and well. Or...

The big pile of rubble looked even worse up close. Some great slabs of concrete had fallen on each other like a deck of jagged and misshapen cards, leaving holes and gaps easily big enough for a man to climb through.

"El," he called, still aware that she might not be anywhere in the area. He climbed over one of concrete slabs and peered into the darkness beneath it. "El!" He said, louder this time.

He heard something. Even over the chaotic sounds of the search and rescue, he heard a small voice.

Lucas scrambled forward on his hands and knees, poking his head and shoulders deeper into a hole in the rubble.

"El!" he called again. There was no answer this time, but he was sure of what he'd heard. Bracing his back against one slab of cement, he

used both legs to push against another and make the hole wider. He scrambled down through the hole, cutting his hands on sharp bits of metal and rock and he climbed.

"El!" he called again. It was dark down inside. The pile of debris blocked out most of the noise and light from outside. He clicked on a flashlight and cast the beam around the little cave. It turned out not to be so little. It was almost like a perfectly round bubble inside the pile of wreckage.

His stomach jumped as the flashlight beam swept over a shape on the floor.

It was her! Lucas scrambled over the dark and jagged surface to get to El, who lay on her back, spread out like a rag doll. He dropped to his knees at her side, ready to check to a pulse.

But there was no need. She was breathing. He let out a tense breath.

She was bruised and cut, and her eyes were closed, but she was alive. Lucas glanced up at the ceiling of the little cave and smiled. So she'd been able to carve out a little shelter for herself even as a whole building had dropped on her head. Pretty cool.

He tried to slide a hand gently under her head, wondering if she might be too hurt for him to move her.

Her eyes fluttered.

"Hey, El, don't try to move," he said quietly. "How much does it hurt? Can you feel your legs?"

Her eyes snapped open wide and she sat straight up.

"Mike? Allie?!"

"They're ok," Lucas said, trying to keep her from moving too fast. "They're on their way out of the city. Let's focus on you. Is anything broken?"

She seemed to listen to him and moved more cautiously, lifting one arm, then the other, then one leg at a time. When she was done, she

answered his question with a head shake, which made her wince in pain.

"Ok, take it slow," Lucas told her. "Do you remember what happened before you were knocked out?"

El pressed her hands over her eyes for a moment, maybe trying to remember, maybe trying to help the pain in her head.

"I fought him," El said. "Too strong."

"The firestarter?" Lucas asked, his voice tense.

"No. The Russian."

"Do you know where he went?" He asked.

"No..."

"Well we should get out of here, if you feel like you can move," Lucas said. "We can meet up with Mike and the others once we're outside the city. How do you feel?"

"I can move," she said.

"Ok, don't go too fast. You might be hurt and not know it. Hold on to me. I'll help you climb out."

The Monster gazed blankly into the river, watching bits of debris float with the current. He wasn't far downstream from the bridge. He hadn't expected that small woman to collapse half the bridge out from under his feet and send him tumbling into the cold water, but it had only been an inconvenience. He certainly wasn't hurt. He wondered if she was dead. He'd certainly hit her pretty hard with his last assault. He considered going back to see that she was dead. He also considered waiting. It might be easier to try to connect with her mind and destroy her from a distance, like he had with the man who called himself Walter. Yes, that might be simpler. She certainly couldn't collapse a bridge and plunge him into a river again if he chose to finish her that way. Still, she might be dead already.

He also considered going to look for his firestarter. The man must surely still be alive and under the Monster's thrall, but without a strong psychic hand to guide his mind, he might simply wander around the city starting fires at random. Those who were in his psychic thrall could be unpredictable when they weren't supervised, the monster had learned.

But something else nagged at the back of his mind. Instead of going to look for either of the other two psychics, the Monster continued to gaze at the slowly running water. It was almost mesmerizing in its endless cycle. He remembered a river near the secret lab where he'd been transformed into the thing he was now. That one had flowed a little faster than this one.

Suddenly he could put his finger on it. He got that nagging feeling sometimes. It was one of his waking dreams trying to drift up into his conscious mind. He had no control over what he would see. The dreams showed him what they wanted, and were sometimes infuriating in their vagueness, or unnecessarily specific. He continued to gaze into the water, letting the dream come. The light in his one eye dimmed.

Suddenly he was somewhere else. He knew that his body was right back where he'd left it at the side of the river, but all of his senses were somewhere else.

He was staring at the baby. It was so close he wanted to reach out a psychic hand and pluck it from out of the arms that held it. The baby was upset. He could hear it crying. Clearly the Monster knew this was a vision from some time in the future. But how long? A few hours? A few days? And where was he?

As he looked around, trying to get a better view of his surroundings, everything changed. He felt a swirl of wind and a quick flop of his stomach, as if he'd flipped head over heals, and then he was somewhere else again. It was dark, wherever he was now. The buildings around him looked old and decayed, and tiny particles floated through the air. Then, just as suddenly, he was on fire.

Heat and pain like he'd never felt before washed over him in great waves. He could feel the flesh and scales melting right off his bones.

For the first instant, he could see nothing but the blinding orange storm of light, but then the fire melted his eyes, and he was plunged into darkness. Each nerve in his body sent shockwaves of pain shooting through him as they were seared away. He opened his mouth to roar, to scream, but the sound was lost in the midst of the raging flames.

The monster physically staggered back a few steps as the dream ended. We was back by the river, and there was no fire.

Cold fear washed over him for the first time in as long as he could remember. He had never known pain like that, not even in his transformations years ago. Even though the flames were gone, the memory of that excruciating pain was fresh in his mind, as was the certainty that he would not survive that burning.

He was going to die.

Even though the flames had been only a dream, he had come to understand very well that his dreams could show him possible futures. He was afraid.

He couldn't remember being afraid before. He'd never encountered another being with the power to destroy him. It was all so new.

His fee started moving before he'd even made up his mind. His first instinct was to go find the baby and destroy it before this possible future could ever come true. But he was too afraid.

If he ever got close to the little girl, that might be the very moment that he'd just witnessed. He had no idea when or where the terrible burning was going to happen. No. He would have to send others. Others who didn't matter to him.

That would be easy. There were thousands of men with guns moving through the city. Men with weak minds that he could easily dominate. He would take some of them as his own, and send them to destroy this terrifying little girl. It would be easy.

"So Mike and El's baby can control fire, too?" Hopper remarked to the

quiet van as it cruised through the Upside Down.

"Yeah, I guess so," Joyce told him. "It seems pretty serious, too. Like she might go off at any second."

"What are the odds," Hopper asked in Sam's general direction. "We've been chasing a firestarter all around town for days, and now this."

"I don't think it's a coincidence," Will told him. "Dustin thinks they're connected, because of their powers."

"And then there's another guy, you're telling me?" Hopper asked Will. "Another one with ability's like El?"

"Maybe like El," Will said. "He's from a Russian lab. We don't really know what he can do, but he's bad."

Hopper sat in thoughtful silence for a minute. "Can El... have you ever seen her... mind control or something? Can she make people do things?"

"I don't think so," Will said, frowning.

"But you don't know about this Russian one, either?" Hopper thought out loud. Then he leaned toward Sam again. "I wonder if that's what happened to our Franc. I wonder if he's being controlled."

"Doubt it," Sam grunted. "Guy's a criminal, Hop."

"I don't think so," Hopper replied. "I talked to him. I looked him in the eyes. He was at the end of his road. He was done. And besides, why here? Why Chicago?"

"They told us the Russian might be able to track baby Allie from a distance," Will offered helpfully. "That could be why they came here, cause she was here."

"See, it's that Russian," Hopper said to Sam.

"If you say so," Sam told Hopper.

"I have to get back there," Hopper said, to no one in particular. "I

have to talk to him again."

"You can't!" Joyce said.

"Why?" Will asked at the same time.

"I don't think our Franc is really doing this, at least not for himself," Hopper said. "I talked him down once. I think I can do it again."

"We got away safe once," Joyce protested. "I don't want you to go back there."

"But I might be able to keep this from blowing up even more," Hopper told her. "They told you this is all because of Mike and El's baby? You want them to have to keep running? I might be able to stop all of this." He turned back to Sam again.

"Sam, stop the van."

Without much hesitation at all, the other man took his foot off the gas pedal. The van began to coast to a stop amid the tentacles and spores of the Upside Down.

"I need you to promise you'll get them out of the city safe."

"You got it, Hop," Sam said solemnly.

"Hopper!" Joyce argued.

He turned to look at Will next. The younger man's eyes were wide with concern. "Will, I have to go try and change his mind. I need you to take me back to the real world now. For Mike and El, I have to go try." Will nodded.

Joyce protested again and Hopper turned back to face her. "I need you to trust me, Joyce. I promise, I'll come back. I just need you to trust me. I have to do this."

Mike drummed his fingers nervously on dashboard and shifted Allie in his other arm. He looked over at Dustin for the millionth time. The traffic was creeping along because everyone was trying to get out of

Chicago at once. The four lane highway was packed with cars five wide. They would sit at an infuriating stand still for a few seconds. Then the cars up ahead would clear just enough, and the row of cars behind them would slam on the gas like races horses let out of their pens, only to have to slam on the brakes a few feet later. After several more seconds of stand still, they would do it all over again. Mike's nerves were stretched to the maximum, as were probably all the other drivers on the road.

His eyes drifted across to the other side of the highway, separated from them by a four foot cement barrier. It was completely deserted. Everyone was trying to get out of Chicago, and no one was trying to get back in. That wasn't entirely true. About half an hour ago, Mike had seen a convoy of Army jeeps come racing up the otherwise deserted highway into the city. That only made him want to get out of the city even sooner. His eyes lingered longingly on that open stretch of road that was so close by. He imagined Dustin driving through a gap in the cement barrier and cruising back to Hawkins at 90 miles an hour. It only seemed fair, since he and Allie had more reasons to escape the city than all those other cars. It would never work, though. His eyes drifted to the rear view mirror, back to the pair of police cars who were stuck in the same traffic as Mike and Dustin, just a few rows further back. He didn't want to attract any attention to them and their stolen van, so they'd continue to flow, or rather creep, along with the bumper to bumper traffic. Mike continued to drum his fingers on the dashboard.

"I'm sure they're fine," Dustin said into the silence.

"I know," Mike said quickly, as if he hadn't been worrying about the others who were still inside the city.

They were silent again for a long time.

"Wish we had El to just... push all these cars off to one side," Dustin said, maybe trying to lighten the mood.

Mike glanced in the mirror at the police cars again. They were as inactive as ever, crawling along with the rest of the traffic.

Allie burbled and squirmed in his arms.

"What was Hopper doing here, anyway?" Dustin asked, not for the first time in the near silent van ride.

"He must have been looking for us," Mike said sadly. "I can't think of any other reason. Joyce didn't even know he was here."

"Maybe the agents got him already," Dustin suggested. "Maybe after we all left Hawkins, the agents rounded up people for questioning, people who might know where we'd gone."

Mike shrugged his shoulders uncomfortably and stared down at his shoes. He really hoped he hadn't dragged more people into trouble along with his family.

"Uh... Mike, we've got trouble," Dustin said. The tone in his voice shook Mike out of his fog. His eyes flicked back to the mirror.

Those two police cars had started to move, trying to thread their way slowly out of the traffic, heading in their direction.

"They can't have spotted us," Dustin said. "We didn't do anything to give ourselves away."

"I don't know how they found us," Mike said, his heartbeat racing. "We're trapped."

Behind them, the police turned on their lights, and the traffic began to slowly, slowly, clear a path, letting the two cars through.

"What do we do?!" Dustin asked, starting to bounce up and down in his seat with pent up energy.

Mike's eyes flew back and forth between the cops and Dustin. Fear and indecision ran around and around in his mind. He squeezed Allie to his chest.

Suddenly his eyes stopped on Dustin. He thought about everything that they'd been through since fleeing from Hawkins. He thought about all the close calls with the agents and the cops. For the first time, when he looked back on those things, he wasn't afraid. He and his friends had made it this far. Something told him they would make it the rest of the way, somehow.

"We can't let them catch us," Mike said, staring hard at Dustin, all of the indecision gone now. Dustin looked back at him, verging on panicked and afraid. Mike didn't blink. "I know I can count on you. Get us out of here."

A lightswitch flipped in Dustin's eyes. Mike saw the panic dissapear to be replaced by resolve. Dustin turned to look straight ahead at the sea of cars in front of them.

His hands squeezed the steering wheel.

"Hold on to something," Dustin said.

He bumped the car right in front of them, then slammed on the gas. Their van's tires squealed as they bulldozed the little Toyota out of their way. Dustin spun the wheel wildly to the left and shot through a gap in the cement barrier. He jumped into the empty oncoming lanes and tore off, picking up speed as he went. The two police cars gave chase.

The van's engine whined. Mike gripped the dash board with white knuckles and craned his neck to get a better look at the cops behind them. Allie squirmed in his arms.

It had taken the cops a few seconds longer to get out of the tangle of traffic than Dustin had, but once they did, the two squad cars made up for lost time, their lights flashing menacingly as they caught up. Dustin never let off the gas pedal, topping the van off at somewhere over 110 miles an hour. They raced past an exit ramp, and another pair of police cars came flying down the ramp to join in the chase.

"Are these regular cops, or do they work for the agents?" Dustin asked.

"Doesn't matter," Mike said.

"We'll never outrun them on the open road. Not in a van," Dustin announced. "We need to find a way to lose them. Hang on."

At the next exit ramp, which was facing the wrong way for them, Dustin jerked the wheel and slammed on the brakes. Mike braced himself against the dashboard so he wouldn't crush Allie as he was

thrown to one side of the van, then the other. Somehow, Dustin came out of their tail spin facing the right way, and sent the van climbing the ramp to escape the highway even as the faster police cars shot right past them, doing their best to stop and turn around.

"Faster! Go! Go!" Mike yelled.

"That's the Mike Wheeler I know and love!" Dustin said, beaming.

15. Chapter 15

Author's Note: Thanks so much to everyone who wrote a review, and thanks for sticking with this story all along. We probably have about 2 more chapters and an epilogue left to go in this one. I've already got a second story started, which is not at all related to this one. The new story will be Season 2 related, unlike this one. If you remember from way back, I started writing this story before Season 2 came out, so that's why there's no Max or Kali 08 and such, sadly. So anyway, this one's almost done, and I'm so glad for everyone who has followed so far, and stay tuned for the next story as soon as this one is finished. I only hope that I have time to finish the new story before Season 3 comes out and makes that one obsolete, too. :)

Chapter 15

The dank and decayed scenery of the Upside Down rolled past the van's windows as Sam bounced along at an easy fifty miles an hour. They'd let Hopper go a while back, and had planned to return to their original goal of escaping the city. Will had been growing more and more concerned about his friends, though, and had been trying to make contact.

"Lucas, Mike, Dustin, come in. Does anyone copy, over?" Will said, not for the first time, into his little handheld bundle of wires with a small antenna.

"Did you make that, kid?" Sam asked, impressed.

"Dustin made them," Will answered in a distracted voice. Sam glanced into the back seat, where Joyce still sat. She had been quiet since they'd let Hopper run off on his peace mission.

Will called into the homemade radio again, but still got only static. "I think the Upside Down is messing with the signal," Will told Sam. "I'm going to have to bring us back out."

"Copy that," Sam said, letting his foot off the gas. He'd been through a couple flips from the normal world to the Upside Down and back by

now, and he understood that he didn't know exactly what he'd be stepping into once they returned. On a city street like this, though it was empty and dead looking in the upside down, it could be packed with cars once they flipped back.

Sam brought the car to a complete stop and glanced nervously over at Will. The younger man closed his eyes and took a slow breath. It actually seemed like he was becoming more of a pro at this weird party trick each time he did it. Sam reflected on just how strange that was. Until a week ago, he hadn't believed a man could start fires with his brain. Now he'd seen a woman lift a car into the air, and he'd been taken into another dimension. If Hopper lived with this kind of stuff every day, Sam wondered how he'd managed to hang on to his sanity.

"You always been able to do this, kid?" Sam asked Will.

He shrugged. "About half of my life now." The younger man breathed one more time, his eyes still closed, and snap, they were back.

Sam swept his eyes around the Chicago street, now happily illuminated by sunlight. The tentacles were gone, and so were the floating spores in the air.

The street was just as deserted in the real world as it had been in the Upside Down, though. Sam took that as a good sign, because it might have meant that most of the people had been able to evacuate, and wouldn't get caught in the fires.

Speaking of fires, Sam saw a hazy plume of smoke rising off in the distance, in the direction of downtown and the river.

"Let's not go that way," he suggested.

Will was already on his homemade walkie talkie again. "Lucas, Dustin, Mike, come in. Does anyone copy, over?"

Movement in the rear view mirror caught Sam's eye.

A police car had just turned onto their road.

Its lights weren't on, and it wasn't speeding. However, they were in a

van, sitting in the middle of the road, not going anywhere, with no other cars anywhere in sight. They stood out like a sore thumb.

Sam shifted the car into drive and tried to look nonchalant as he slowly headed off down the road.

It didn't work. The cop car flashed its lights once and pulled in behind him. He stopped.

Sam could feel Joyce and Will stiffen up.

"They can't find us," Will breathed. "They think we can take them to baby Allie. They'll arrest us and use us to get their hands on her."

Sam gave him a startled look. "The cops are after you too?"

"It's true," Joyce told him from the back seat. "They already had me in handcuffs once."

Sam looked back and forth between them. "You're serious? Why would they do that?"

"They work for the agents," Will insisted. "The agent want baby Allie."

The pair of cops were already getting out of their car and coming over to the van. Sam briefly considered speeding away right then and there, but that would only make them chase him. If there was any way he could talk his way out of this, he wanted to try.

"You can't tell them who we are," Will hissed as the cops approached the van. The one on Sam's side knocked, and Sam lowered the window.

"You didn't evacuate with everybody else?" The cop asked him.

"Uh, we had some car trouble," Sam told him. "That's what we're trying to do now."

"Give me everyone's name in the vehicle," the cop asked.

"Well sure," Sam said agreeably. "I'm Chuck Finley. This is my buddy Andy McGee, and she's his neighbor, Carrie White. We're trying to get

out of town before the fireworks get any worse."

The cop turned into his shoulder for a moment to call on his radio. Then he returned his attention to Sam.

"Please step out of the vehicle and show me your drives license."

"Sure thing, officer," Sam said, giving Will and Joyce what he hoped was a reassuring look as he climbed out of the car. "Is there a problem?"

"The problem is that the city's under a state of emergency now," the cop told him. "We're searching everyone who hasn't already evacuated." He spoke into his radio again. "Give me those names again."

Sam could just barely hear the voice coming back from the officer's ear piece. "...Henderson, Joyce Byers, William Byers, Michael Wheeler..."

Sam had run out of time for talking.

He jumped at the cop while his attention was still on the radio. His left fist connected with the cop's jaw at the same time that his right hand snatched the radio off his belt.

The other cop shouted in alarm. He'd been making his way around the front of the van before Sam had moved. With the hood still separating them, Sam threw the radio and nailed him in the face.

There was an ugly crunching noise, and the cop dropped his gun to grab his broken nose. Sam jumped and slid across the hood, gliding into a well placed punch that dropped the second cop. Sam whirled around when he heard a car door slam, afraid that the first cop was already back on his feet, but it was Joyce, already scooping up the dropped gun.

"Whoa, easy, easy Joyce. It's over," he said, afraid that she might actually shoot two of Chicago's finest.

"Will, I think we'd better go back to your Upside Down before any more of them show up," Sam said.

He nodded, but his little homemade radio crackled to life before he could say anything.

"Will, this is Lucas. Reading you loud and clear. We need assistance. Situation critical. Over."

"We have to go on foot from here," Dustin yelled as he tore off his seat belt and threw open the van door. "If we can make it in there before they catch up to us..." he pointed to an old abandoned warehouse a short block away. A run down city park, with a rickety old chain link fence, stood between them and their chosen hiding place.

Mike ran for all he was worth. He had to hope that Dustin's driving had put enough distance between them and the pursuing cop cars. They reached the chain link, and Dustin scrambled over, landing heavily on the other side. Mike handed Allie over the fence and then climbed up himself. He had one leg over the other side of the fence when he heard the unwelcome sound of revving engines and squealing tires.

"Out of time!" Dustin yelled, already starting to run toward the warehouse. "Come on Mike!"

Mike leaped off the fence. His pant leg caught on the rusty links and he landed awkwardly on one leg. He winced when he felt a sharp pain, but he couldn't let it slow him down. Dustin and Allie were already half way to the warehouse. Mike ran to catch up, grinding his teeth against the pain in his leg.

The sound of police cars bearing down on them grew louder. Mike didn't turn his head to see. He just kept running.

For one happy moment, it seemed like they might make it to safety in time, but the cops caught up to them, flying around a street corner and blocking the way.

The two cars came to a stop, four cops exploding out of them to point guns and shout at Mike and Dustin to surrender.

The two of them stood there gasping for breath from their sprint. Mike bent over and put his hands on his knees. Dustin couldn't because he was carrying Allie. She started to cry.

"Put your hands up," one of the cops ordered.

"And put the baby down," another added.

She cried even louder.

"You can't have her!" Dustin yelled.

Mike listened to her cry, getting louder and louder. "Actually, Dustin, I think you should put her down," he said.

"Mike?" Dustin asked him in disbelief.

"Trust me on this," Mike said as Allie started to wail at the top of her lungs. "I think you should do it."

Slowly, reluctantly, Dustin gently placed the baby on the hood of one of the cars. Immediately, one of the cops marched over and grabbed Dustin's arms, pulling them behind his back. He took Dustin over to the other car, bent him over the hood, and slapped on a pair of handcuffs. Dustin glared the whole time, but didn't resist. Mike continued to watch Allie, squirming and bawling on the hood of the cop car, as one of the other officers came up behind him and took out a second pair of handcuffs.

Allie cried.

Mike watched her.

The cop grabbed one of his wrists.

A tiny flicker of bright orange sprang out of Allie's squirming hand.

Mike spun around, away from the car and Allie. The cop who was trying to handcuff him ended up on the wrong side.

As Allie burst into flames, the cop's body shielded Mike from most of it. His blue uniform caught on fire, and he yelled in pain and ran,

flailing his arms to try to put himself out. The cop who was cuffing Dustin looked over in shock at the raging bonfire that had suddenly appeared on the hood of the other car where a second ago there had only been a screaming baby.

The remaining two cops seemed to react on instinct. The sudden appearance of a fire from nowhere must have been so unexpected that they didn't know what to do except turn toward it and draw their guns.

The sight of guns pointing at his tiny baby made something inside of Mike snap.

He flew at them, his feet barely touching the ground, and swung at them with everything his thin body had. Mike wasn't conscious of everything he did. He felt a fist collide with a jaw, then an elbow collide with a rib. He felt like a man possessed. He punched one of the cops again, and felt a crunch as a bone in his hand broke. But the pain barely registered in his rabid brain. He swung the broken hand again, and hit the cop even harder.

Dustin watched Mike taking on the two cops with immeasurable pride. Pressed to the edge with no other way to protect his baby, Mike had found his inner tiger. Dustin, bent over the police car hood with his hands cuffed behind his back, couldn't help but smile as he watched his friend give twice as good as he was getting. Mike Wheeler was a flurry of hands, feet, small rocks, finger nails, and wild hair as he punched and kicked and thrashed away at the two cops, both bigger and stronger than he was.

"That's it Mike, kick their asses!" Dustin yelled.

"Be quiet," the cop who had handcuffed Dustin said. He still had one hand resting on Dustin's back, reminding him not to try to run or cause trouble. "Unit 22-18 requesting additional officers," the cop said into his radio. He continued to babysit Dustin for another minute until, realizing that his two buddies weren't going to be able to handle Mike on their own, made his way over to join in the effort.

Dustin gave another smile as he watched the third cop walk away. El

had psychic abilities. Lucas was strong and athletic. Hopper was tough as nails. But Dustin Henderson had been born with a superpower of his own. On a normal day, it wasn't something he could use to fight evil with. But today was a special day.

One of the effects of cleidocranial dysplasia was that he'd been born without a collar bone.

With the third cop now several yards away and fully occupied with trying to subdue Mike, Dustin flexed and rolled his shoulders, and easily slipped his cuffed hands past his legs and around to his front side.

When Mike had tackled the first cop, he'd dropped his gun, and it still lay in the gravel, forgotten in the melee. Dustin crouched low, trying not to attract attention, and loped toward the gun. Bless his heart, Mike was still giving all three cops such a hard time, they never saw Dustin scoop up the gun. He stood up straight and aimed it at them.

"Hey, uh, hey guys, stop. I have a gun!"

It took the cops several long seconds to realize the situation. Once they did, they stopped fighting Mike and turned around to face Dustin.

"Put your hands up and don't move," Dustin tried. After a moment's hesitation, one of the cops started to reach for his gun.

Decisions flashed through Dustin's mind. There was no time to think about it.

He fired a warning shot at the ground.

The bang was so much louder than Dustin expected. His whole body flinched and his ears began to ring.

The cop cried out in shock and staggered to the ground, holding his leg.

Dustin's eyes went wide as he saw the red blood begin to seep out around the cop's fingers.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry," Dustin said without thinking. Then he waved the gun toward the other two cops. "I mean... That was a warning shot. Next time I won't be so nice. Put your hands up and move away from my friend."

This time they didn't hesitate to follow his orders. Dustin's adrenaline was pumping like never before in his life, but he managed to keep his hands from shaking. Mike leaped to his feet and snatched Allie off the hood of the car. She had actually been mildly burning away ever since the fight started, about the size of a very small camp fire, but she stopped when Mike picked her up.

"You can help your buddy with his leg over there now," Dustin said, "But don't try to follow us. Or else." He waved the gun in a gesture that he hoped looked properly threatening. "Come on Mike. I'm right behind you."

With the sound of more police sirens approaching in the distance, the three of them ran.

Hopper crouched under the canvas tarp on the back of an Army flatbed truck as it bounced uncomfortably down an otherwise deserted road. He'd stowed away under the tarp, guessing that the truck might be headed directly into the action. After an uncomfortable twenty minute ride, he turned out to be right. Poking his head out of the tarp, he saw a big plume of smoke rising up from just on the other side of that city block. With both a sense of relief and dread, he felt that he was in the right place.

As the Army truck rolled to a stop, he slide out from under the tarp, dropped to the ground, and jogged away to hide behind a parked car. He peered around the edge of the car and watched two dozen soldiers in Army green pull off the tarp and start unloading boxes from the truck. They seemed to be in a big hurry. As soon as the boxes were off the truck, the soldiers popped them open and dug inside, pulling out what Hopper eventually recognized as shiny, silver, flame-resistant suits.

The soldiers quickly stepped into the suits, zipped up, pulled the masks over their faces, and filed out the way they'd come. He could

hear the roaring of flames on the other side of the building now. Franc must have been working his magic.

They seemed to have left the truck unguarded, so Hopper crept out from behind the car and hurried over to the open boxes. There were still several suits left, so he grabbed one. It wasn't quite tall enough to fit him comfortably, but it would have to do. He jammed the mask over his head and, making sure he was completely covered, jogged off in the direction of the chaos.

The plume of smoke and the echoing shouts of the soldiers hadn't been enough to fully prepare Hopper for the scene of fiery destruction that he saw as he came around the other side of the buildings.

Dozens of soldiers, half of them clad in the shiny, fireproof suits, had taken up position around the firestarter. Some of them knelt behind the cover of abandoned cars or city trash cans, some of them lay on their bellies with rifles perched on the ground in front of them, ready to shoot. At the center of all this attention was a great whirling tornado of fire. It stretched twenty feet across and reached as high as the buildings around it. The soldiers had given it a wide berth as they set up their perimeter. The fire continued to swirl and rage as the soldiers stood ready but unable to do anything effective. Hopper stared at the scene for a long time.

He'd seen what the firestarter could do. His abilities seemed pretty much inexhaustible. If he wanted to send his fire tornado spinning out in all directions to consume the soldiers, and the buildings behind them, and the buildings for a full city block in each direction, he could probably do it. As far as Hopper could see, there wasn't anything the soldiers could do. Besides, he didn't want the Army to kill the firestarter. Hopper wanted his help.

His feet began moving before he was even aware that he'd made the decision. His shiny, fireproof boots started carrying him across the no-man's-land between the soldiers and the raging fire. Some of them shouted at him to stop, most likely assuming he was one of their number who had, for some inconceivable reason, decided to just march right into the middle of the tornado. Hopper ignored them and pressed on. Even through the suit, he could feel the heat of the

spinning wall of flames that loomed up in front of him, and sweat began to break out on his face.

He came to a stop right at the edge of the flames. He couldn't see inside, and he didn't really know what he was going to do in there, but he had to try. Taking one deep breath that might have been his last, Hopper stepped into the fire.

The flames grabbed him and tried to jerk him up and away into the tornado. Hopper was lifted a few feet into the air and spun violently around before he fell heavily to his knees, but that was it. He had passed through the curtain of fire.

Inside, the eye of the storm was calm. Hopper craned his neck and marveled for a moment at just what the inside of a firestorm looked like. It was something he would probably, hopefully, never see again.

The firestarter stood alone in the center of the storm. Hopper pulled himself to his feet and approached. The soldiers and the police on the outside of the storm only knew him as a living weapon that had shown up one day out of the blue and started burning down Chicago. Hopper knew that he was a man who had been a father and a husband, who had lost his whole family, and who had become consumed with revenge. Hopper knew him as a man who could feel remorse for the terrible things he'd done. Hopper knew him as a man who had done the right thing and surrendered himself without a fight. But, as Hopper looked into his face now, he didn't see that man.

There was a blank look in the man's eyes, as if he were actually somewhere else. Hopper could see no hint of the man he'd once gently placed in the back of a squad car. He took two more steps forward, and the man seemed to notice his presence for the first time. The firestarter raised a hand toward him.

Hopper flinch and held an arm in front of his face, imagining a great jet of orange flame bursting out from that outstretched hand to blow him away.

"Wait! Wait! I'm just here to talk!" Hopper shouted, realizing that the fireproof face mask probably blocked out most of his voice. He quickly grabbed the mask and pulled it off.

"Do you remember me?" Hopper asked, putting his hands up to show that they were empty. "I'm not with those soldiers. It's just me. You remember me, right?"

There was no recognition in those blank eyes. The firestarter stared back at Hopper as if not really seeing him. But he hadn't burned Hopper alive yet, and that was something.

He took another step forward.

Hopper considered putting his mask back on. The air in the eye of the storm was a lot hotter than he'd realized.

"I don't really know what's going on here," Hopper admitted, taking another step closer. "There's agents running around, they tell me there's a Russian... thing. My family and my friends are in danger. That's all I really know. And the last time I saw you, you were... different."

Hopper took another step. He still saw nothing in the man's eyes.

"Last time I saw you, you were done doing this." Hopper waved his hand toward the spinning wall of fire all around them. "That Russian thing... Is he in your head? Are you doing this because of him?"

Still nothing. Hopper took another step.

"Because I need your help. I need you to stop this. My family and my friends are here and they're running for their lives. And you can do some damn amazing things. And I need your help."

Nothing. Another step. Hopper was almost close enough to reach out and touch him now.

"I think you're a good man. I don't think you want to do this. I know you wish you could go back and save your family. Please. Help me save mine."

There it was. A flicker crossed the man's eyes. They focused on Hopper, as if surprised to see him there.

"Franc!" Hopper shouted in relief. "I know you're in there. Talk to

me!"

The moment passed instantly. The eyes shifted back to their blank, dead state. The hand came back up. The fingers tensed. Hopper saw a single tongue of flame spring from the outstretched hand. He thought about jamming his mask back on his face, but knew it wouldn't be enough to save his life.

He lunged and swung.

It was a race between his fist and the fire.

Hopper shut his eyes as the world around him erupted in bright orange flame.

He felt his knuckles connect solidly with a chin.

And, as fast as they'd appeared, the flames vanished.

Hopper's momentum brought him tumbling onto Franc's unconscious body, and the two men fell heavily to the ground.

Hopper lifted his head and look around, breathing fast. His face didn't feel burned. The firestorm was gone. He could see the perimeter of soldiers all around him staring in surprise. In spite of everything else, Hopper couldn't help but smile with relief.

Underneath the weight of his chest, Franc stirred awake. Hopper scrambled off him and sat back to give him some space. The other man sat up and looked around with fresh eyes. The blank, dead look was gone.

"What hap..." He said groggily, surveying the soldiers and the battle damage all around him.

"Are you back, buddy?" Hopper asked. "Cause I really need you right now."

"Oh... Oh God," Franc said, looking back at Hopper. "What did I do?"

"I don't think it was you," Hopper told him. "It wasn't good, though. I'll explain, but right now we need to get out of here. Those soldiers

won't let us just walk away. Can you create a distraction? You know... with your powers?"

Dustin and Mike had left their van far behind as they raced through an abandoned warehouse. They could hear the boots and radios of the cops who weren't nearly far enough behind them. Dustin's Reboks slid over bits of broken tile and plaster on the floor as the two of them made their way across a third story floor littered with broken pallets and old equipment. He crashed to a halt against a door and threw it open to find a rusty old fire escape.

"Down here," he told Mike. They scrambled onto the rickety old metal, which groaned under their weight. Dustin tried to focus hard on not stumbling as he took the stairs two at a time.

"I see them!" Someone shouted from close by.

Dustin jumped the last few steps to the dirty alleyway below, motivated to run faster by the angry voices behind them. He turned around to see Mike hot on his heels. He also jumped the last few steps off the fire escape.

Crack.

Dustin heard the sound as Mike's foot hit the pavement. He lurched forward to catch both Mike and Allie before they fell down face first.

"Are you alright?" Dustin demanded.

Mike's face was screwed up in pain as he tried to put weight on the injured leg.

"No," Mike hissed.

"Down there, in the alley!" A cop yelled from the top of the fire escape. Dustin heard the metal creak and grown as they piled onto it.

"Dustin, you have to go without me," Mike said, grabbing his arm so tight his finger nails dug in.

"Are you crazy?" Dustin asked. "No way."

"I think it's broken," Mike said through gritted teeth. "I'll only slow you down. I need you to take Allie and run."

"Mike, I can't," Dustin argued.

"Please! If they get me, so what! But they can't get Allie. They can't!" Mike thrust the little girl into Dustin's hands. Dustin took her without thinking. He couldn't look away from Mike's pain filled face.

"Please," Mike begged. "Leave me."

Dustin's eyes filled up with tears.

"Go!" Mike yelled.

Dustin's brain barely registered that his feet were already moving. The cops were pouring down the fire escape even as they spoke. He started to run. Over his shoulder, he could see Mike try to take a single step to follow, and collapse onto the ground. Dustin squeezed Allie to his chest and kept running. He got one last look, through his blurring tears, at Mike with two cops kneeling on his back and forcing a pair of handcuffs on him, before he turned a corner and vanished from sight.

16. Chapter 16

Author's note: We've almost reached the end! There will be one more chapter, and then an epilogue. I started this story back before season 2 came out, (look how slow I am), and it feels really good to finally finish it. I had so much fun creating this, so thanks so much for reading it. There will be a new, different story soon to follow. I've already started writing it, so I'll start posting that one as soon as this one is finished.

Chapter 16

The van's tires squelched as they rolled over a couple of tendrils and then came to a stop. The tendrils recoiled and released a few spores into the air, then lay back down.

"This is the place?" Sam asked Will as he looked around at the Upside Down version of Chicago. They'd pulled up in front of a three story office building which might have looked nice in the real world, but certain not down there.

"I think so," Will told Sam. "As soon as I bring us back, we can contact Lucas again."

Sam glanced at Joyce in the back seat. She didn't look any happier than he did, but she was taking this whole alternate-dimension thing very well. He wondered if she'd seen it before today.

In the blink of an eye, they were back in the real world. Sam swept his gaze around quickly, looking for threats. There were no police cars. That was a good sign. The office building, and the whole street as far as he could see, had been totally evacuated. That menacing plume of smoke was pretty far off in the distance, which meant they were well away from the fighting. All things considered, Sam concluded that they were in a pretty safe place.

"Lucas, this is Will, do you copy?" He called into his radio.

"I copy, Will," the voice came back. "I see you now. I'm inside the building to your right. Come up to the third floor."

"Copy that," Will said. The three of them piled out of the van and headed inside and up the stairs, with Joyce right on Will's heels, and Sam bringing up the rear, keeping his eyes peeled for any new threats.

After three flights of stairs, they pushed through a door that belonged to some insurance agency or something. Lucas had turned it into his temporary safe house. The first thing Will noticed was that his friend had piled up desks and filing cabinets in front of one of the windows to build himself a sniper's nest. Lucas had somehow gotten his hands on a rifle.

The second thing that Will noticed was El, curled up on a couch that had probably been put there for new clients in the waiting room of the insurance agency.

"Are you guys Ok?" Will asked as he ran over to them.

"We're better now that you're here," Lucas said, resting the rifle on his shoulder.

El didn't look so good. Will noticed the bruises and small cuts on her skin, as if she'd been dragged over a gravel road. She also looked pale and sick. She opened here eyes, sat up slowly, and gave Will a very weak smile.

"Are you Ok?" Will asked again.

"Do you know where the others are?" Lucas asked him quickly. "I can't get Mike or Dustin on the radios."

"Neither can I," Will told him, sadly. "They might have made it out of the city, so the radios are out of range."

"That'd be great," Lucas agreed. "Or they might have been captured, and lost their radios. We need to find out."

"I can find them," El said, he voice barely above a whisper.

"El, you should save your strength," Lucas told her. "You need to rest."

But she was already gone. She had closed her eyes, and gone very

still. A second later, her head fell back limply as her mind left her body and went somewhere else.

"Is she finding them?" Joyce asked.

"I think so," Will answered.

"She needs to rest," Lucas insisted.

"What happened?" Will asked.

"She was in a fight," Lucas said, staring at her in concern. "I didn't go great. I had to carry her most of the way here."

"The firestarter did this?" Sam asked in a bewildered voice.

"Not him, the other one," Lucas answered quickly. Then he looked inquisitively at Sam. "Who are you?"

"Sam Ashe. I'm a friend of Hopper's," Sam told him. "Are you... new to this stuff?"

"Not really," Lucas said. "We had a pretty interesting childhood."

El gasped, bringing everyone's attention back.

Her eyes snapped open. Fresh blood was just starting to well up from her nose.

"I saw them!" She said, trying to get up from the couch.

"Whoa, slow down," Lucas said, trying to hold her back. "At least let us help you walk."

El didn't argue. She gratefully allowed Will and Joyce to swoop in and each take an arm, and she leaned heavily on them as she rose from the couch and started across the room. Will tried to hide his concern as he helped her along.

"We have to hurry," she said, he voice still sounding weak.

Will's fingers nervously played with the hem of his T shirt as the van

again cruised through Upside Down Chicago. Behind the wheel, Sam was giving it a little more gas than usual. He seemed like a good guy, as far as Will could tell, and he seemed to understand the gravity of the situation. Will felt as desperate to get Allie back as if she were his own. The pit of his stomach was tied into a knot that wouldn't loosen up until they had her back. He was also worried about Mike and Dustin and Hopper, but he was a little more confident that they could handle themselves.

The depressing colors of the Upside Down that rolled past the van's windows didn't help his mood. Even without his very bad memories of that place, its very appearance seemed tailor made to cause hopelessness and despair.

Sam touched the brakes, but only a little, as they came down a highway exit ramp. The concrete and asphalt were completely devoid of others cars. From their perspective within the Upside Down, Will and his little van full of people might have been the last humans on Earth. He just hoped the area would be equally as deserted once they returned to the real world. The less people who saw them right now, the better.

"There..." El whispered weakly from the back seat, then wiped her nose preemptively against the little drop of blood that was sure to come. Sam glanced into the rear view mirror to see where she was pointing, and followed her directions. Without really stopping, he turned left off the exit ramp and headed down the street. They were in an old industrial district. Several big warehouses loomed up on either side of the street. Even though everything looked dead and decayed in the Upside Down, Will guessed that these particular warehouses might have been worn down and abandoned in the real world as well.

"That one..." El said, slowly lifting herself from the back seat. Will watched her with concern. She refused to stop using her powers, even in her weakened state. He didn't doubt that she knew her own limits better than the rest of them did, but it really looked like she was at the end of her rope. He felt a small twinge of mixed emotions as he realized that she'd probably looked and felt the same when she'd helped to find him in the Upside Down all those years ago. If not for her, he'd have died in the demogorgon's nest. And she'd done all that

when he'd been a complete stranger to her. He'd spent years wondering about it. Of course he knew that Mike, Lucas, and Dustin would risk life and limb to save him back then, but El had never met him. It had taken him a long time to figure out why. After a while, he'd decided that a few people, a very few people in the world, were just good.

Sam brought the van to a stop. Several tentacles recoiled as they were crushed under its tires. El was already trying to climb out of the Van. Lucas and Joyce were equal parts trying to help her get up and trying to slow her down so she wouldn't hurt herself. It made Will's heart ache. He wondered if her powers would run out at some point if she got too exhausted, or if she could just keep using them until they drained her battery beyond its limits. His eyes flicked down to the blood on her sleeve. He suddenly wondered if El's own powers could kill her. He shook his head and tried not to think about it. Right now he needed to bring them back from the Upside Down.

Using his own... peculiar ability didn't drain Will like it did El. On the contrary, he could feel it getting easier with practice. Leaning back in his seat, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It took almost no effort anymore. With a little mental push, it was done. Will would gladly have swapped with El and let her be the one who didn't have to pay a cost to use her abilities. Her's were more useful, anyway.

Even before opening his eyes, he could tell that he was back in the real world. The others were already climbing out of the van. Will followed them, taking in their bright new surroundings. The wet tentacles on the ground were gone, replaced by dry, crumbly pavement. The ominous storm clouds that always hung overhead in the Upside Down had been replaced by bright blue sky. At least, the sky was bright and blue in one direction. As Will turned around the glance back toward the heart of the city, he could still see that angry plume of smoke from the battle that had taken place there, or maybe was still taking place.

El was already at the door to the abandoned warehouse. It looked like she wanted to walk on her own, but Joyce and Lucas were refusing to leave her side. As Will went to catch up to them, he noticed that Sam was watching their rear, and searching the area for any sign of bad guys. The sight made Will smile and feel just a little

better. It reminded him of Hopper.

The warehouse inside turned out to be as empty as the street was outside. Whatever business had gone on there, it had long since moved away to Japan or something. Broken glass and crumbled plaster crunched under their feet as they went. Maybe this place had also been a source of amusement for the trouble-causing youth of the neighborhood. Will lifted his walkie talkie to his mouth as they made their way through the unlit rooms.

"Dustin, do you copy? Over." Only static answered him. Will wasn't too surprised. He'd figured that Dustin and Mike must have lost their own radios, or they would have made contact long ago.

"I don't think there are any agents around to hear us," Lucas suggested. Then he raised his voice and shouted in no particular direction. "Dustin!"

For a long moment, there was only dusty silence. Will held his breath as he waited. Somewhere off in the distance, he heard the sound of feet scuffing over broken glass and plaster.

"Dustin?" Lucas called again.

Then they heard the distant sound of a baby cry.

El almost launched herself in the direction of the sounds. Lucas and Joyce hurried to keep up with her.

"Dustin!" Lucas yelled again.

"Lucas, is that you?" Came Dustin's voice. Will's heart jumped. It was nice to hear good ol Dustin's voice again.

After running through several more rooms, and stumbling over some old, unused machinery, they found him. Dustin, clutching Baby Allie tight to his chest, ran at them with a look of greatest relief on his face. His clothes were covered in dirt and dust, as if he'd literally been hiding under a desk or under one of those rusty old machines.

El reached Dustin first, grabbing him and her baby into a tight hug. He wrapped his arms around them like a big panda. Her knees

sagged, and Dustin helped to keep her upright.

"You Ok?" Lucas asked.

"I'm lucky you guys found me," Dustin said. "I was at the end of the line."

El suddenly lifted her head and looked around in alarm.

"Where's Mike?" She asked.

"We got separated," Dustin said. "We... He... I..."

"El put her hands on his shoulders and looked him in the eyes. Fear and concern and a dozen other things flew across her face. "What happened?" She asked in a shaky voice.

"They took him," Dustin told her.

Mike had been thrown hard into an uncomfortable plastic chair, and then had his hands cuffed to the table. Both the table and the chair were bolted to the floor of the little interrogation room where the cops had put him. Mike looked angrily around at the featureless walls. There was one door, which was locked, and a one way mirror. Assuming the agents or the cops or someone was watching him through that glass, Mike scowled at it. He had nothing else to do.

Chained to the table as he was, he couldn't escape. Even if he could somehow get out of the handcuffs, he wouldn't get very far. His fractured leg still sent shooting pains through his body, as if he were repeatedly making that fateful last step off the ladder that had gotten him in this place. His broken hand didn't feel any better.

The only thing that took his mind off the pain, the only thing worse than the pain, were his thoughts of the others. He didn't know if Dustin had gotten away with Allie, or if he'd been captured as well. Or maybe killed. The agents wanted Allie taken alive for their twisted experiments, but maybe they didn't care about the others. Maybe they wouldn't mind shooting Dustin and taking the baby from his dead hands. He also worried about El. He had no doubts she'd be able to handle the monster, but anything could happen. There were

hundreds of people with guns and trucks, and a pyrokinetic who was burning down the city. Mike just wished they could all go back to their safe and quiet home where nothing bad ever happened, where nothing would ever come and take away the people who meant more to him than his own life.

The lock clicked and the door to Mike's little interrogation cell swung open, interrupting his thoughts.

Mike didn't know the man who walked inside, but he glared daggers at him anyway. He was tall, dressed in a gray suit without a tie, had gray hair, and a face that looked like it never smiled. The man stared back with an unreadable expression, ignoring Mike's glare. He sat down in the opposite chair.

"Mr. Wheeler," he said. Mike only continued to glare back.

"My name is Security Director Carver. I've had my eyes on your family for years. Years."

Mike didn't blink. He didn't know if this man had come to threaten him, to gloat, to kill him, or something else, but he wasn't going to give him any satisfaction by showing fear.

"Years," Carver repeated again. "And you haven't caused me any trouble, until now. A quiet suburban family with a white picket fence who never poked your heads up and never needed my attention, until now. What changed, Mr. Wheeler?"

Mike didn't respond.

"Now my job is security," Carver said, after realizing that he wasn't going to get an answer. "It's my sworn duty. The security of the innocent people who've gotten themselves caught in the crossfire today. You know they never asked for any of this. Even your security, Mr. Wheeler. I'm here to protect you."

Mike shook his head in disgust.

"You don't believe me?" Carver said, a hint of anger in his voice. "Look outside. There are dangerous things, inhuman things, that came here because of you and your family. This fight is bigger than

you. You need my help to survive."

"Your help? All of this started because of you!" Mike yelled.

"Wrong!" Carver shot back. "All of this started because of you. You and your family. Look at what's happening to the city. Is that what you want?"

Mike ground his teeth and didn't speak.

"Now I can help you. I can protect you. I can take your family someplace safe, far away from here. But I need your cooperation. Tell me where they are."

Relief flooded through Mike's body. They were safe! The bad men hadn't caught them yet. It was just him, and he wasn't going to give up anything.

"Tell me where they are," Carver said again, not angry this time, but insistent.

"Go to hell," Mike said. He wasn't even angry. If anything, he felt better. As long as he didn't talk, the bad men wouldn't get what they wanted.

Carver leaned in close. Mike could smell cigarette smoke on his clothes. Carver put a hand gently over Mike's own, which was still handcuffed to the table.

"People are dying out there, Mr. Wheeler. It's my job to clean up this mess. I'm not a very patient man. Tell me where they are." He pressed down hard, and the broken bone in Mike's hand crunched.

Mike's eyes filled up with tears from the pain. "I don't know where they are. And even if I did, I'd never tell you." Mike blinked away the tears and glared at Carver again. "I would never tell you."

Carver stood from his chair, leaning all his weight on the one hand. The bones popped and cracked. Carver twisted his hand. Mike tried to pull away, but the handcuffs held him in place. Carver squeezed the broken hand again, and Mike almost shook from the pain.

To his own surprise, Mike felt more relieved than angry. Carver could hurt or break him all he wanted, but the important ones were safe.

"You'll never find them," Mike said, almost feeling brave enough to smile. "I told them to leave me as a decoy so they could escape. They're probably a hundred miles away by now. Before tomorrow, they'll be out of the country. El isn't the only special one, you know. All my friends have powers. They're gone, and you'll never find them."

The tiny interrogation room inside a Chicago police station looked about as sinister in the Upside Down as it probably did in real life. Will shivered as he looked around the cramped little room with nothing but a table and two chairs. It pained him to think of Mike locked up there, with no way to know that his friends and family were about to rescue him. Will hoped that his friend wouldn't fall into despair. The he'd keep believing that they'd rescue him.

"Are you sure this is the place?" Will asked.

El wiped more blood from her nose and nodded. "Sure," she confirmed. Even in the dim light of the Upside Down, Will could see that her skin was pale and her eyes were sunken. She leaned heavily on his shoulder as the two of them positioned themselves exactly where they hoped Mike would be when they shifted. Then Will took a deep breath, and pushed with his mind.

Mike grunted in pain again as Carver leaned on his broken hand. "Tell me where they are," the man demanded.

Mike only gritted his teeth.

Suddenly he was aware of two more people in the room.

One instant, he'd been alone with Carver, then there were two people standing on either side of him. Mike's head snapped quickly from side to side. It was El and Will!

Carver looked up in surprise, too. El lashed out a hand toward him,

and he was thrown violently through the one way mirror, landing in a pile of shattered glass.

El shot over to Mike and threw her arms around him before he was even aware what was happening. He felt Will's hand touch his shoulder, and then the world around him dissolved and shifted into the dark shades of the Upside Down.

El tightened her iron grip around Mike's neck, and he stood up to return her embrace. After he'd done it, he belatedly realized that the handcuffs hadn't come with him into the Upside Down, so he could use his hands again.

Her hug was so tight, if he didn't know how much she loved him, he might have thought she was trying to kill him. He buried his face in her hair, which helped to hide the tears in his eyes. He opened his mouth to say something, but his voice didn't want to work. He hugged her back just as tightly.

"Alive," El almost sobbed.

"Mike tried to talk again, and ended up making a sound that was half way between laughing and crying. Then something else flashed through his mind.

"Allie!" He said.

"Safe," El answered immediately, her own face buried in his shoulder. "She's safe. With the others." A second later, she seemed to lose all her strength and sagged weakly in his arms.

"Whoa, are you Ok?" He asked.

"Fine. Just tired," she whispered into his shoulder.

All of her weight shifted onto Mike's broken leg. He winced. The pain was bad, but the happiness was better.

"We should get back to the others," Will interrupted gently. "I guess you guys can both lean on me. We don't have far to go."

Dustin paced nervously back and forth as he waited. He hated waiting. His anxiety was made worse by the memory that he couldn't shake. That memory of one last look over his shoulder as the bad men grabbed Mike and took him away. Dustin hated that he'd left Mike to be taken. No matter how many times he'd told himself that it had been the only way to keep Baby Allie safe, he didn't feel any better about it.

The baby in his arms started to make little agitated noises. She was probably picking up the vibes he was sending out. He didn't want her getting as anxious as he was. That could be dangerous.

"Why don't you let me hold her for a little while?" Joyce asked, coming over to him.

"Oh, thanks," Dustin said, distracted. He couldn't stop thinking about where Mike might be right now, or what the bad men might be doing to him. "Thanks," he said again. Joyce took the baby and bounced her in her arms. In a second, the baby was making happy little noises. Dustin felt very lucky to have Joyce along with them on this mission.

He resumed his nervous pacing, cringing a little as he noticed that he was crushing some of those little gray worms with each step. The Upside Down seemed to be full of the gross little things. He glanced around the street where they'd parked the van. Lucas was checking his rifle to make sure that the caustic atmosphere wasn't going to damage it. Sam was leaning against the van smoking a cigarette. Dustin kept pacing. Only Will and El had actually gone inside the police station to look for Mike. The rest of them had stayed behind with the van. The idea had been to send as few people into danger as possible. But, now that Dustin reconsidered it, Maybe El should have brought more backup with her. She'd looked as weak as he'd ever seen her.

"Mike!" Lucas shouted.

Dustin snapped out of his unhappy musings and spun around. There he was! Mike Wheeler, whole and alive, though he was walking on just one leg and hanging on Will's shoulder for support. Dustin felt so happy he could have cried.

Hanging off of Will's other shoulder, looking worse than ever, was El. Baby Allie must have sensed her coming, because she started joyfully calling out for attention.

Dustin and Lucas both rushed forward to take the weight of their friends off of Will's narrow shoulders.

"We've got the party back together!" Dustin cheered.

"Now let's get outta here," Lucas added.

"Hold on," Joyce said quietly. She gazed sadly at El. "We're still missing one person."

El gazed back at her with dark, hollow eyes. She looked like she needed to sleep for a year.

"I know you've been through so much," Joyce said, her voice catching. "And it's not fair for me to ask you, but I can't just leave him out there, and I don't know where-"

"I can find him," El said, her voice so weak and quiet that Dustin could barely hear.

Joyce's eyes watered up. "I'm sorry."

El took Joyce's hand gently. It might have been a reassuring gesture, but Dustin also wondered if El was just too weak to say anything else. Lucas had been helping her stand, and he let her slowly sink to her knees so she could concentrate. El closed her eyes and went very still. Lucas and Mike crouched down on either side of her, Mike still favoring his leg, and waited with obvious apprehension for El to work her magic.

Everyone waited quietly while she knelt there, even Allie. El's eyelids twitched a few times in response to whatever she was seeing inside her head. A small trickle of blood began to run from her nose.

Her face screwed up in a painful expression.

"Is she Ok?" Lucas asked quietly.

She twitched again.

"I don't know," Mike said, sounding very afraid.

Suddenly El sat up straighter. Her eyes flew open, but then rolled back inter her head. She started to slump backward to the floor, but Mike and Lucas caught her.

"El," Mike yelled.

Lucas put a hand under the back of her head to support her neck.

"She won't wake up," Make said trying to gently shake her awake.

The baby started to cry.

Hopper and Franc peered around the corner of an old liquor store on a downtown street corner as they watched a few more of those green Army trucks cruise past.

"We could steal one of those," Franc suggested.

"Too conspicuous," Hopper told him. "We need something that will blend in."

Franc looked a little further down the road. There were a few of those black sedans that the government agent types drove around. He nodded in that direction.

"Better," Hopper agreed. "Now let me do the dirty work. You attract too much attention."

"I'll follow your lead," Franc said. Suddenly he felt a flash in his mind. He stood up straight and cast his eyes down the opposite street away from the trucks.

There was a single figure standing off in the distance, slowly moving closer. He was still too far away to see him well, but the one oversized arm was hard to miss. And those eyes... Even at such a distance, Franc couldn't have missed those eyes. He felt a pressure building inside his head. The quiet whispers grew louder, telling him

what he had to do.

"What's wrong?" Hopper asked, looking to Franc, who stared transfixed at the approaching figure.

"He's here," Franc rasped, his voice barely escaping his suddenly dry throat.

"Then let's get out of here," Hopper said.

Franc couldn't tear his eyes away. He couldn't drown out the voices, either.

Suddenly there was a van almost on top of them.

One minute it hadn't been there. Now it was.

Franc and Hopper threw themselves out of the way as the van barreled down on them.

17. Chapter 17

Author's Note: Here we are. The culmination of a story outline that I wrote more than a year go (before Season 2 was even out). This is the second to last entry in the story. There will be an epilogue posted in a few days. I'll also leave a longer author's note there with my final thoughts. This story has been incredibly fulfilling to finish, and I really want to thank everybody who has stuck with it to the end.

Chapter 17

Dustin was already out of his seat as the van skidded to a stop, his hand already on the door latch. He threw it open and leaped out with an exhilarating sense of energy and purpose. He felt so alive! Through all the close calls and death-defying risks that the party had taken since fleeing Hawkins and coming to Chicago, Dustin had had his doubts that they would make it out alive. But here they were! Against all odds the party was whole and intact. If they could just get Hopper and then get out, he felt that everything would be alright.

He was in motion before his feet even hit the pavement. Hopper and some other guy had thrown themselves face first onto the pavement when Will had brought the van, still speeding at 60 miles an hour, out of the Upside Down. Dustin ran to them, fully intending to pick up hopper with one hand and drag him back into the van. Adrenaline was a beautiful thing, he reflected.

Hopper sprang back to his feet before Dustin reached him. "Look out!" he shouted, pointing wildly. Dustin slid to a stop and whirled around to look in the direction Hopper was pointing.

His stomach lurched.

A single figure stood at the far end of the street. For a few heartbeats, all the action went out of Dustin.

Lucas and Sam saw it, too. They jumped out of the van, Lucas with his rifle, and Sam with his pistol. Dustin didn't stand around to watched them. He turned back to Hopper and waved a hand toward

the van. "Come on! Let's get out of here." Dustin winced at the crack of gunfire behind him. He hoped the monster was getting all it could handle.

"Come on," he yelled at Hopper again.

Something made Dustin stagger, as if a hurricane force wind had suddenly hit in the back. He looked over his shoulder just in time to see both Lucas and Sam go flying over his head.

With wide eyed horror Dustin's eyes followed them as they sailed through the air like rag dolls and plummeted back down to the street.

"Lucas!" Dustin yelled, racing after them. The adrenaline was back, and his heart was pounding harder than ever.

Hopper watched Sam and Lucas hit the pavement with bone breaking force. He started to run to them, but then a hand clamped around his ankle and tripped him up.

He spun around to see it had been Franc. The man was on his knees, jerking his head around violently. Hopper scrambled back up and grabbed Franc by the collar so he could look him in the face.

Franc's eyes bulged wide open and darted around in every direction. His teeth gritted together in an expression of pain. The man pressed his hands against his own temples.

"He's in my head!" Franc cried.

"You have to fight it!" Hopper shouted back, yanking hard on the collar to keep the other man's face close to his own. "You hear me?" He noticed blood starting to seep from Franc's nose and ears. "Look at me!" He insisted. Hopper couldn't tell if Frank's wild eyes saw anything, or if he was trapped inside his own head. He kept a strong grip on his collar anyway, forcing Franc to look at him. "Stay with me. You've got to fight it! We need you here!"

"I can't!" Franc yelled. Tiny drops of blood appeared at the corners of his eyes now, too.

Joyce's head swung around frantically as she looked from Hopper to Dustin, who was running toward where Lucas lay unmoving on the ground, to Will who jumped out of the van and ran after Dustin, to Mike in the back seat, who cradled El's head in his lap as she lay unconscious from overexertion, to the monster standing at the end of the street with a single arm raised menacingly. That horrible thing was tearing apart her friends and family one person at a time. She started moving even before her brain had decided what to do.

Joyce jumped over her seat and slid in behind the steering wheel. She yelled over her shoulder for Mike to hold on to El and the baby, then she threw the van into gear and slammed on the gas.

The engine roared, and they went barreling down the street toward the monster. Joyce's hands gripped the wheel until her knuckles turned white. She glared through knitted eyebrows at the monster. She pictured him crushed under the van's tires, or slammed into a bloody pulp against its front bumper.

Suddenly the van lurched, and Joyce's head was thrown back against the seat. Her stomach flipped as the van was lifted off the ground and went sailing through the air. She saw the blue sky and the gray pavement trade places through her windshield as the van rolled over and over in the air. She heard both Mike and the baby cry out in panic from the back seat.

El's eyes snapped wide open. It felt like she was pulling herself out of a deep, black hole, but something told her she had to come back.

For a few heartbeats, she had no idea where she was. The first things she felt were Mike and baby.

Mike and the baby.

Relief washed over her like a flood. She hadn't lost them.

But they weren't Ok. As two heartbeats dragged on to three, then four, then five, El became inescapably aware that things were very much wrong. She could sense Mike and Allie's fear in her mind. She could also feel all kinds of other things. Joyce. Hopper.

The monster.

She'd never forget that feeling as long as she lived. In her mind's eye, the monster felt like a whirlpool made out of her worst nightmares, swirling and sucking in everything around it.

El's stomach flipped. What was that feeling?

She sat up, lifting her head from Mike's lap.

Outside the van's windows, the world was spinning around her. She was falling.

The van was falling.

El suddenly realized where she was and what was happening. The van was falling. They were all about to die.

Hopper tore his eyes away from Frank, who was still struggling against his grip, blood now pouring from his eyes and ears.

The sound of the van's engine revving pulled Hopper's attention away. Not loosening his grip on Franc's collar, he craned his neck to watch the van tearing off down the road toward the monster. For a fleeting second, he had a hopeful vision of the monster plastered all over the pavement. Then, to his horror, Hopper watched as, with a small flick of his head, the monster sent the van flying end over end into the sky. Hopper's mouth dropped open as he watched most of the people he loved about to crash to their deaths.

Then, just as suddenly as it had been thrown into the air, the van stopped falling, as if it had reached the end of its leash.

"No!" El screamed out loud as the pavement raced up toward the falling van. She closed her eyes and threw everything she had at the approaching ground.

The van lurched to a stop. It hadn't been gentle. There hadn't been time for El to be gentle. She and Joyce and Mike were thrown out of their seats. But they were alive.

El panted for breath. The van was heavy.

She let it drop the last few feet. It hit the pavement with a jarring thud. Fresh blood began to pour from her nose.

She grabbed Mike's shoulder and checked to make sure he and Allie hadn't been hurt.

A new feeling burst its way into her mind.

Her trick with the van must have alerted the monster to her presence. She could feel his black claws scrambling at the edges of her consciousness, trying to find a way in. She slapped him away, but that only let him know exactly where to pry. With renewed effort, she felt the monster trying to force his way in. Pressure started to build up inside her skull. Hundreds of pounds of weight seemed to have dropped onto her shoulders.

El shook her head, which didn't help, and focused her eyes on Mike and the baby again.

"What is it?!" Mike asked her, clearly able to see that she wasn't alright.

She shook her head again, fighting the black presence that was descending over her like a blanket. Her eyes filled with tears as she took one last look at the two most important people in her world.

"I love you," El said. She glanced at the van's door, and it swung open for her. She lowered one foot to the pavement.

"Wait!" Mike shouted. The blood from El's nose was running over her lip. The pressuring in her head was almost unbearable. Each step she took was as hard as running a mile.

She looked back at them as her other foot touched the pavement.

"Don't go!" Mike yelled. Allie cried. El could barely see them through the tears streaming from her eyes.

"I love you," she said one last time, before she slid the door shut between them.

She turned to look at the monster. His face was inhuman and unreadable, but his aura was unmistakable. His presence felt like it was filling up more and more of her mind with each second, leaving less and less of her. She pushed back against it, but he was so strong.

"No more," El whispered to herself.

She reached out a hand toward the monster. He froze in place, pinned by her invisible grip. She felt his cry of anger inside her mind. It hurt her as much as it hurt him. She didn't release her grip.

He fought back. She felt like her head was going to explode. She felt like her body was made of stone and couldn't move.

She didn't let him go. Instead, she envisioned pulling him apart, one molecule at a time. The pain in her head increased. Her vision shrank to a tiny tunnel of visible light inside a world of black. She screamed and held the pressure against him, trying to dissolve the monster into a million pieces.

Hopper noticed the change in an instant. Franc stopped struggling. Hopper released his grip on the other man.

"Are you still with me, buddy? I need you right now," he said desperately. Franc's eyes had stopped darting wildly around. They seemed to be trying to focus on Hopper, or on anything at all.

Hopper turned to look toward the van again. While he'd been struggling with Franc, El must have gotten out. He saw her now, standing across from the monster. The two of them seemed chained to where they stood, each one reaching a single hand toward the other.

As he watched, a light breeze kicked up around them, swirling and stirring up dirt and old newspapers and discarded food wrappers from the city streets.

He looked back to Franc. The man's eyes seemed to have returned to normal. He was breathing heavily, like he'd just emerged from a fight.

"Talk to me," Hopper asked.

"I'm here," Franc reassured him.

"How's your head?"

"He's gone," Franc said shakily. "I don't know what happened."

"I think he's busy with someone else," Hopper said, nodding toward El.

Franc slowly and unsteadily got to his feet. Hopper continued to stare at the storm that was building around those two. That light breeze had, in the last few seconds, blown itself into a small tornado. Dirt and trash and bits of pavement and rubble were being torn from the ground and sent spiraling around El and the monster. Though it was hard to see through the storm, it looked to Hoppers eyes like... the monster was falling apart. Hopper couldn't think of other words to describe it. The monster's outline was becoming hazy. Little black fibers seemed to be breaking off of his body and swirling away into the wind.

A flash of light pulled Hoppers attention away.

Franc had taken a step away from him. Little candles of fire appeared at his finger tips.

"There's not much time," Franc said.

Hopper looked at the storm again. He had to squint against the whipping winds. The monster looked hazier than ever. But, now that he really looked, so did El. Even as the surprise registered in his mind, he saw her drop to her knees.

"You should get everyone out of here," Franc said. There was a new tone of resolve in his voice that almost scared Hopper. His hands were completely engulfed in flames. He locked eyes with Hopper one last time.

"Can you distract him long enough for me?" Hopper asked.

"I'm not going to distract him," Franc said flatly. Fire erupted from his

back and shoulders, climbing high over his head. He nodded a goodbye, and turned to stalk toward the swirling tornado.

Will crouched next to Dustin over Lucas' unmoving form. Dustin was holding Lucas' head in his hands, trying to get some kind of response. A fresh feeling of dread swept over Will. He didn't want to think-

A strong wind pulled at his hair and clothes. Will glanced over his shoulder in mild surprise.

He stood up straight when he saw the scene laid out on a Chicago street before him. El and the monster were caught up in the center of a black, swirling cloud, with their van parked only a few feet away. Hopper was running toward the van. A slow-moving inferno was marching toward the storm. Will couldn't even make out the man at the center of the fire anymore as he bore down on El and the monster.

El.

She was already on her knees. Even as Will watched, his sense of dread building, she slumped over onto the ground. Her tornado of destruction gave no sign of slowing down, though. Something snapped in Will's mind. His feet were in motion before he was even aware of what he'd decided to do. He had to get to them. He ran for all he was worth toward the heart of the storm.

"Will!" Dustin yelled at his back. "Where are you going?!"

Mike strained to heave himself out of the van's seat again. But, again, it was no use. Even with her huge battle going on, she had enough left over to keep him pinned to his chair, inside the van where he would be safe.

He hated it. He strained with every muscle in his body to stand up and go to her, but he remained nailed in place.

Exhausted from the struggle, pausing to catch his breath, Mike stared out the van's window at the horrible scene outside. He had already

watched El fall weakly to her knees. Now she dropped limply to the ground, as if her body had nothing left in it. If her body was gone, her mind certainly wasn't. The force pinning him to his chair didn't let up, and the swirling storm that seemed to be pulling the monster apart piece by piece didn't let up.

Tears soaking his face, Mike tore his eyes away from El and looked at Allie. She was balling at the top of her lungs. He had no doubt that she could feel, on some level, in some way, what was going on outside. He didn't understand the scope of her abilities, but he had no doubt about that. He hugged her tight against his shoulder.

He wished he had a way to help calm her, the way El always could. He lacked their special connection. But even if he had, Mike knew he wouldn't have been able to tell the baby that everything was going to be alright, because everything wasn't going to be alright. He squeezed Allie even tighter, distantly aware that if she blew up right now, he and Joyce and the van maybe El, too, would burn up in a few seconds. He looked out the window again at El's limp body, lying at the center of the storm. The whole scene was blurry through his tears.

With a jolt of surprise, he noticed something else through the swirling clouds around the van. A great raging inferno was stalking toward them, growing higher and brighter with each step.

Mike lifted Allie from his shoulder and held her in his lap, staring with wide, frightened eyes. He felt panic mixing with defeat and with resolve. His mind couldn't seem to settle on just one feeling. He stared into the baby's eyes.

She seemed to stare back.

A strange feeling washed over Mike. He suddenly felt... distant.

He was still aware that he had a body, but the details were very fuzzy. He was, however, aware of a whole collection of new things. He could feel a dark and terrible black hole not far away. That must have been how the monster felt, he thought distractedly. He was also aware of Allie. She glowed like a little warm sun in his hands. It wasn't so much the hands that were feeling her, though. It was his

mind. He could feel that she was feeling things, too. She was aware of the black hole. She was aware of her mom, the center of her universe, fading from her consciousness. And fire.

There was fire.

Mike tried to tell her she would be alright. He felt like she heard him.

FIRE!

Will ran. Even though Hopper had a big head start on him, somehow his thin legs had gotten him there first. He jumped face first into the storm. Even as he did so, he felt the firestarter explode. Everything in his mind screamed at Will that he was too late. He reached out with his thoughts, grabbed the monster and the firestarter, and pulled.

The sky and pavement and buildings had only partially shifted into the dark shades of the Upside Down before Will had to throw and hand in front of his face against the flames.

18. Chapter 18

Thanks so much to everyone who followed this through to the end. It took more than a year (with a lot of life distractions), but here it is. I started writing it just because I liked Stranger Things (the world, the characters, the feel of the whole thing), but somewhere about half way through this story, I realized that the thing I liked most was how much the main characters love each other. Watching Season 1 on Netflix, I was so struck by how the three boys plus El were willing to go to any lengths to save Will, and I felt like they would have done the same no matter which of them had been taken by the Demogorgon. That's the element of Firebaby that I loved writing the most. At the beginning of this story, Mike was kind of distant from his childhood friends. But, when he and El got into trouble, everyone from Will Dustin to Will to Lucas to Joyce to Hopper jumped in without a second's hesitation and risked everything to help. I hope I'm a good enough person that, if one of my friends is ever pursued by government agents in black cars and psychic monsters with weird super powers, I would come running to the rescue on the spot.

I have a second story already started. If you remember, I started Firebaby back before Season 2, which is why its missing some awesome characters like Max and Billy. This new story that I'm starting will be set during Season 2, so it WILL have all those great characters. I just hope I can get at least half of it finished before Season 3 comes in and throws me off again. :)

Epilogue

"Or you could just have your fire-mage cast protection," Will suggested.

The young girl gave him a confused look. "Fire-mages can cast protection?" She asked.

Mike frowned, flipping through the pages of the Dungeon Master's Guide. "I think they're all born with the ability to cast protection," he said. "But maybe it's not in the book. You know what, you can call it

a house rule." Mike handed the book back to his Middle School student, Amy. "You're the Dungeon Master. You can do whatever you want."

She looked sideways at her two friends, Danny and Lenny. "Oh, I have something in mind for these two," she said.

"Don't give her any ideas, Mr. Wheeler," Danny laughed. "She threw a pair of ice dragons against us last week."

"Doesn't sound so bad to me," Mike told them. "Ice is way less dangerous than fire."

"If you say so," Danny said.

"Well, let me know on Monday how your campaign goes," Mike told Amy. "I've got to get home. It's Allie's second birthday."

Mike's Earth and Biology students gathered up their homework, and their Dungeon Master's Guide, and headed out of the classroom. Smiling to himself, he zipped up his briefcase and followed them to the door.

Principal Clarke passed him in the hallway.

"You're still here?" He asked in surprise. "I thought you'd be home for the birthday party already."

"On my way," Mike told him. "I'm not late yet. We pushed it back half an hour cause Lucas has a long drive to get here.

"And how is Mr. Sinclair doing these days?" Mr. Clarke asked.

"He's back on his feet," Mike said.

"Good to hear," Mr. Clarke nodded. "That must have been a nasty car accident he was in."

"Yep," Mike lied, keeping his face straight. "Semi truck didn't stop at a red light a rear ended him. He's lucky he made it out alive. But Lucas is a fighter. The doctor's didn't want to believe it, but he made a full recovery."

Mr. Clarke nodded, looking impressed. "And how's the little angel?"

"Well, I don't know if you can call a two year old an angel," Mike laughed. "But she's doing great. We took her to the zoo in Bloomington last week. She didn't know what to think about the giraffes. Actually, El didn't know what to think about them, either."

Mr. Clarke laughed. "Bring me pictures of the party."

"I will," Mike promised, and went out to his car.

He tapped his fingers happily on the steering wheel as he made the drive home, listening to his Bryan Adams cassette "Into the Fire". It struck him just how pretty Hawkins was in the fall, just before it got cold. He found it strange that he could make the same drive from home every single day, but still notice new things.

His tires crunched on gravel as he pulled into his driveway. He had to park way out by the road because of the half dozen cars that were already there. He climbed the three steps to his front door, and wasn't even that surprised when it popped open just before he touched the doorknob. Even with so many people over to distract her, El could still sense when he got home.

A wave of voices flooded out of the kitchen as Mike dropped his briefcase and car keys in the living room. He could hear Dustin boisterously telling everyone that they should try the new movie Little Rascals. He could hear Joyce respond that the new cast just weren't as good as the original kids.

They all stopped in the middle of their various conversations to greet Mike as he came into the kitchen. Hopper, with a few extra wrinkles on his face this year, but otherwise looking the same as ever. Joyce. Dustin. Lucas, who wasn't even walking with a limp anymore. His mom and Dad, and 14 year old Holly. Even Nancy and Jonathan had made the drive all the way over from New York to make up for missing Allie's first birthday. El beamed at him over the top of a cake with two unlit candles. Baby Allie bounced up and down happily in her lap.

"I guess everybody's here," Nancy said, looking around the crowded

kitchen. "We can get started."

"Yeah, I just..." Dustin said, his voice suddenly becoming morose. "I just wish Will could have been here."

"We all do," Joyce said, her face falling. Mike looked across the sad faces. The room had gone suddenly quiet. He felt the same. Even with all the rest of his family and friends in one place, he really felt the one piece that was missing.

His eyes slid across the somber faces, from Lucas to El to Dustin to-

Wait a minute.

His yes flicked back to El.

She cracked a smile.

"What are you-" Mike asked in bewilderment.

"Surprise!" El burst out, as if she couldn't hide it any longer. She flicked her head toward their pantry door, which flew open.

Will stood inside, a great big grin on his face.

"It took you long enough," he laughed. "Do you know how long I had to hide in there?"

"I thought you couldn't get out of your job in San Jose," Mike said in surprise.

"That's what El told you," Will laughed again. "We had this planned weeks ago."

Mike could only shake his head.

Will sat down at the kitchen table with the others. He wore long sleeves, as he had ever since Chicago, to hide the burns on his arms. Mike didn't think Will needed to bother, though. His smile and his laugh these days were infectious enough that people rarely noticed. In the middle of all the chatter that started up again once Will was out of the pantry, Mike noticed that Hopper had ducked into the

living room to take a call on his cell phone. The huge, clunky thing had been Joyce's idea, and Hopper still pretended that he didn't like it. Mike met Hopper's eyes through the kitchen doorway, and the older man tensed as if he'd been caught in the act.

"Uh, Sam says hi," Hopper told him. "I'll be there in a second."

Of all the people to join the modern age, Mike had expected Hopper would be the last, but there he was. Smiling and shaking his head again, Mike turned back to face the kitchen table, where Dustin was using a box of matches to light the two little candles on Allie's cake.

"Make a wish!" Karen Wheeler told her granddaughter. Holly beamed at her favorite little niece.

El held the little girl close to the cake.

Allie blinked her eyes once, and the candles went out.